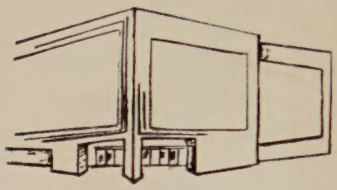
THE TERRIBLE WOMAN and Other One Act Plays by WILBUR DANIEL STEELE



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THE TERRIBLE WOMAN
AND OTHER ONE ACT PLAYS

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AND OTHER ONE ACT PLAYS

BY

WILBUR DANIEL STEELE

INTRODUCTION BY

FRANK SHAY

THE LIBRARY OF THE UNIVERSITY OF CALIFORNIA

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ENGLISH DEPT

TO ONE OF THOSE DEAR AND "TERRIBLE"
WOMEN WHO KNOW WHERE THINGS ARE,

MY MOTHER

INTRODUCTION

The first announcement that the Provincetown Players were to invade New York came in the form of a communiqué worded as follows: "The present organization is the outcome of a group of people interested in the theatre, who gathered spontaneously during two summers at Provincetown, Mass., for the purpose of writing, producing and acting their own plays. The impelling desire of the group was to establish a stage where playwrights of sincere, poetic, literary and dramatic purpose could see their plays in action, and superintend production without submitting to the commercial manager's interpretation of public taste."

That was in 1916. Two years before, as the announcement states, the group led by George Cram Cook began producing their own plays on a wharf on the tip end of Cape Cod. Many of the little groups then unknown have risen to the fame that is one of the outward rewards of ability. Eugene O'Neill, Susan Glaspell, Wilbur Daniel Steele, John Reed, Neith Boyce, Hutchins Hapgood, and later, in New York, came Edna St. Vincent Millay, Floyd Dell, Rita Wellman, Harry Kemp, Alfred Kreymborg and many others. Go look at the shelves of your favorite bookshop and see the printed records, not only of the individuals themselves, but of the Playwrights' Theatre.

In 1914 the original group asked Wilbur Steele for a play. He contributed "Contemporaries," a play based on a biblical parallel with the church riots of the unemployed in New York. The subject was topical and to-day would be considered archaic, and for that

reason is excluded from this collection. When the Provincetown Players arrived in New York, hat in hand, with nothing behind them but a few hours of experience and a future that only enthusiasm such as theirs could endow with anything akin to hope, Mr. Steele brought them another play. This time it was a comedy of the conflict between the summer visitors and the natives in a small town. So well was it received by their new audience that it was revived on numerous occasions, and this comedy, "Not Smart," together with a few plays by O'Neill and Miss Glaspell, became a repertory piece of the Playwrights' Theatre.

Ten years after his first contribution to the summer drama enthusiasts on Cape Cod—another group with the same locale—appealed to him for a play and, as ever, he had one ready. This play, "The Giants' Stair," was one of the outstanding successes of the 1924 season at Provincetown. Forewarned, he has provided us with another comedy for next season in the script of "The Terrible Woman." And now that the Provincetown Players are turning to longer plays, I have no doubt that when the need becomes great Wilbur Steele will have a long play ready to fill the gap.

For all this, Steele is not of the theater nor for the theater alone. He is a master of the short story, and he makes occasional excursions into the field of the novel. He is one of those rare writers who are rapidly disappearing from this systematic and specialized world, for writing is his vocation and writing in all forms is within his power.

The plays in this book have a fundamental sincerity that places them far above the usual run of little theater material. In addition to being actable they are readable—happy union—and one cannot help feeling that

the short play and the short story have much in common. To me, Mr. Steele is master of both forms.

Here, then, between the two covers of a book, are the plays that comprise the best of Mr. Steele's contribution to our theater. Each marks a period in the development of a certain native movement and, as such, each must stand by itself and be considered by its own qualities. It is a record deserving of serious consideration and it marks in no small manner the development of the little theater in America.

FRANK SHAY.

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THE TERRIBLE WOMAN

A Comedy in One Act

CHARACTERS

CHRISTOPHER HUME, *the father of the family*
MARTHA HUME, *the mother of the family*
MARY LONGBOW, *the friend of the family*
TUBS HUME, *the son*

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THE TERRIBLE WOMAN

The TIME *is the present.*

The action takes place on a springtime evening in the living room of the Humes' Connecticut house. In its physical geography the room is as follows: At the rear, left, there is an open stairway, opening front near the center and, after three or four steps, radiating about the newel post, mounting parallel with the wall behind a mahogany rail supported by slim white posts. The other half of the rear wall, right, is occupied by two windows and, between them, a door. The left wall of the room has for its chief feature a fireplace framed in broad paneling, painted ivory white, supporting a clock. The space between the hearth and the wall supporting the stair is filled by a deep divan-settle, upholstered in gray-green. In the opposite wall, the right, there are two doors, the rearward one giving to a passage and telephone, the front one to a guest chamber. Between them stands a tall mahogany secretary, books above behind little panes; below, a pair of electric candles with gray-green shades, which, when lighted, throw their illumination over a blotter of the same color, writing implements, orderly stacks of correspondence, and, prominently, an upright stabber, upon which are impaled all matters of current urgency, bills, business letters, notes from TUBS' *teacher, to be answered in the cool dispassion of the morrow. In the center of*

the room there is a table, the various casual objects upon it building up to the green tent top of a reading lamp, whose light is thrown over a wing chair, on the side toward the chimney fire. In this chair, at the curtain, MARTHA HUME *is seated, busy with a pile of socks.*

The room belongs to MARTHA. *Its stretches of paneling, white, but not staring white; its accents of cool green that are not accents at all; its general air of "a place for everything and everything in its place" that loses the curse of fussiness by virtue of the feeling of space left everywhere by the deliberate restriction and simplicity of the furnishings and the serene and unbroken lines of the decorations—all this is* MARTHA HUME.

Seated, blonde, a little matronly under the folds of her topaz-colored house gown, she examines sock after sock for holes, not in any lip-pursing fashion, nor as if with unction to find them, but with the large, well-balanced serenity of a deity whose function it is to number the hairs of the heads of the least of these and to mark with never-dimming interest the fall of a feather from a sparrow's wing. . . . When she lifts her eyes they look habitually straight ahead; that is to say, to change the direction of her gaze she ordinarily turns her whole head, with an unhurried motion, as if to meet the new sight full-face. . . . When she speaks, her words are measured—not with the pennywise care of the corner grocer—but rather with the lack of care, leisurely and almost somnolent, of the virgin who knows that her lamp is full of oil and its wick forever trimmed. . . . She is described here at such length for the simple

reason that she takes so small a part in the visible action of the drama.

MARY LONGBOW *reclines on the divan-settle, propped up by a pile of cushions in the corner by the turn of the newel post.* CHRISTOPHER HUME *is seated on the floor, his back to the settle, his hands wrapped around his shins, and his boot toes just over the edge of the hearth.*

They are both, at the moment the curtain rises, staring into the fire of lumpy coals in the grate under the chimney. They are both dark, and both slender.

Speaking in terms of geometry, MARTHA HUME *and* CHRISTOPHER HUME *might be supplements, the one of the other; their sum being something like a hundred and eighty degrees; that is to say, a straight line.* CHRISTOPHER *and* MARY *would be more nearly complements; together they might total a right angle —something with a point.*

In the moment of silence following the rise of the curtain, while MARTHA *continues to inspect the socks, there is a small play in pantomime between the other two. Her eyes still dreaming into the fire,* MARY *lifts a hand, as though unconsciously, and lets it rest on* CHRISTOPHER'S *hair, its fingers entwining in the wavy, dark-brown locks. . . . At the feel of it there the man starts, casts an alarmed glance at his wife, whose head, fortunately, is still bent over her work: then, pushing the hand away with a frown of nervousness, runs a finger around the inside of his collar, and peeps back sidewise at the offender. She meets his perturbed gaze with one of pity amounting almost to exasperation, as if to say: "You poor jumpy fool!*

what is there wrong about that?" Unable to bear the strain, CHRISTOPHER *jumps up, thrusts his hands and half his long wrists into his pockets, and strides noisily across the room. Turning back he shifts to the door, opens it, sticks a head out into the darkness, retrieves it, shuts the door, and stands with his back to it. In the direction of his wife:*

CHRIS

Where *can* that little devil be? For the third and last time—

MARY (*mockingly*)

For the *twenty*-third and last time—

MARTHA (*without turning*)

Don't fidget so, Chris; Tubs' quite all right.

CHRIS

Well, *I* don't call it all right, not being home to his supper even. Running wild, God knows where. A kid of eleven!

MARTHA

Going on twelve, father—and then, remember, it's springtime. . . . (*Discovering a hole at last.*) And in the spring of the year, you know, you've just got to make up your mind that things are going to be a little idiotic, and run a little wild. Besides, I told you before dinner Tubs wouldn't be in. So why all this—

CHRIS (*striding forward to aim a long and outraged finger*)

So why all this—*mystery?*

MARY (*joining in with sweetness of smile and malignity of eye*)

Because of course what you *did* say, Martha darling, was that you fully expected Tubs to turn up before the dessert.

MARTHA

Did I? (*Calmly threading a needle.*) Well, I suppose, being Saturday—

MARY

There!

CHRIS

THERE!

MARTHA

There, again! That must be the third—

MARY

The *tenth*—

MARTHA

—time to-day I've made that silly blunder. It means something perfectly abysmal is wrong with you, doesn't it, when you keep calling Friday Saturday, or Monday Tuesday?—you know—

MARY (*hitching a little nearer*)

It means, Martha—if you really want to know what it means—

MARTHA (*laughing lightly and dumping the socks from her lap*)

That the wash came home a day early; that's precisely what it means.

CHRIS (*in an outburst of ironical bitterness*)

Precisely! What chance has the calendar *in this house,* against the witness of the *wash?* Against the day the ice bill is paid! Against the perfectly cos-

mically fatal moment when my best Sunday suit happens to come back from the presser's—

MARTHA

That's so, that did come back to-day, too, and Goldstein's so seldom early. So that, and the wash, and Tubs not going to school—

CHRIS

What do you mean, not going to— Why didn't he go to school? He wasn't sick, was he?

MARTHA (*recovering the sock with the hole and examining it*)

No. He simply decided he wouldn't.

CHRIS

He *what!* Well, I'll *be!* And what, may I ask, did you do then?

MARTHA (*laying the first yarn girder of the darning*)

I did what I could.

CHRIS

And it ended in his—

MARTHA

It ended in his—(*laying the sock down, rising, crossing to the desk, disimpaling a paper from the stabber, she returns, holding it out*)—it ended in this.

CHRIS

What is it? What's it all about? W-w-w-what's the joke?

MARTHA

It's hardly a joke. Our son has left home.

CHRIS

What—in—the—name—of—insanity—are you talking about?

MARTHA

He's gone to live his own life in Texas. But here, read it!

(*Stiffly, without once removing his eyes from his wife's,* CHRIS *takes the paper.* MARY, *rising on her knees on the divan, peers over his shoulder, as, casting a last bull-dog jaw at* MARTHA, *he flicks it open and reads:*)

CHRIS

"Dear Mrs. Hume you are a terrible woman and I do not see the reason I have to go to school any more and all your ar—arg—

MARY

—argiments—

CHRIS

—and all your argiments do not prove nothing because I do not plan to be a school teacher or a man in a store and cow boys do not need to know reading or anything yet they know more use full knowledge than Miss Mincken and I am done with taking a bath ever single night when I take a bath it will be in a water hole and you always say you just want me to look one half decent but if I have my coat on I can not move my arms free or a neck tie also and you want to make me look like some tender foot and that is too much for me and you would think I was your slave and I hope you will be happy now I have hit the trail for Texas for good and I am going to be a man's man Talbot Hume, P. S. I am going to hop

freights so do not worry I have got no money I have got my scout blanket and will sleep where ever night over takes me and feel free and no prison slave to you or no body Talbot Hume, P. S. do not fear I am not angry only regret full Talbot Hume. . . ."
(*There follows a silence. It is* MARY *that breaks it, wagging her head.*)

MARY (*re-reading*)
"*You are a terrible woman.*" Aren't children too—preposterous!
(CHRIS *shrugs her off. He opens his mouth for wild words; then, thinning his lips, speaks in a tone sibilant with repression.*)

CHRIS
When did you find this?

MARTHA
About thirty seconds after he'd sneaked out the back way with his scoutpack on his back. . . . That was about half past two.

CHRIS
And you've been *sitting* here—chattering—as if nothing— (*Giving his head a savage shake and returning to the paper in his hand.*) "I am going to hop freights so do not worry"! My *God!* Do you happen to know what "hopping freights" means, woman? Say!

MARTHA
But don't you see, Christopher, he hasn't a thing on that will harm. He wore all the most disreputable rags he could rake up—even to that green sweater he sifts ashes in—

CHRIS

My—GOD! (*Incredulous, scandalized, helpless, he seems to give her up. Shaking the paper, and getting back to his bloodthirsty monotone.*) *Where* did you find this?

MARTHA

There—on the file there, with the house accounts.

CHRIS

Why, of course! Of *course!* Of *COURSE!*

MARTHA

Naturally, he wanted me to be sure and find it, without fail—

MARY

—And without delay!

CHRIS

Without fail—and without delay! . . . Allow me—(*Crossing* MARTHA *with a slight inclination of the head he goes and slips the note back on the stabber and snaps on the candles, so that they are like altar-lamps illuminating a god. With another inclination of the head.*) Allow me to replace it where it belongs—along with the rest of the documents of the household management. . . .

MARTHA

Don't be a fool, Christopher.

(*She picks up the scattered socks. Marching to the door,* CHRIS *opens it and stands brooding out into the dark.* MARY, *getting off the settle, studies his back. Abruptly, with a trace of nervousness:*)

MARY

Don't be a *perfect* fool!

CHRIS (*slamming the door and wheeling on them*)
Fool? Who *is* the fool in this house? . . . (*To a covert gesture from* MARY.) No, be damned! I've held my tongue for thirteen years!

MARY (*casting a glance at busy* MARTHA; *then in a whisper*)
But why—*now?*

CHRIS (*with a furious shake*)
One thing's certain; it's not *Tubs* that's the fool. When *he* gets too weary of being ordered about eternally like a slave—a mere cog in the horrible clockwork of—of—worse still—a mere piece of furniture in a—a whited sepulcher—moved here—there—dusted the same hour each day—polished—when Tubs—that boy—that baby—when at last he's driven to say to himself: "Look here, after all, I'm somebody; I've an entity; thoughts of my own I've a right to think; a will of my own that's got a right to function; a figure to cut in the world—and a figure that's got to be cut the way *I* see it—not to some one else's pattern—a big, free figure—something worth living for—even if it *is* a little out at elbows—even if its hair *isn't* combed seven times a day—even if—if—

MARTHA (*her arms full of socks; with a smile and a sigh to* MARY)
Can't you do something with him? You're so wonderful that way. Do try! I've got the shirts and the undies yet before I go to bed. (*Starting up the stair.*) And Sunday fairly on top of me. (*A gasp.*) There I go *again*, thinking it's Saturday. (*Pausing, near the top.*) Do try, Mary dear. You're so won-

derful with Chris. (*Exit above.* CHRIS *and* MARY *remain as they were,* MARY *studying him with gathering exasperation, his eyes, separated by a furrow of arrested revolt, following* MARTHA *out of sight. Then* MARY *goes to him, quickly and softly, and laying hold of his shoulder, shakes it.*)

MARY

So you *had* to be a perfect fool.

CHRIS

Well—I couldn't help it. I just couldn't stand it any longer.

MARY

You said it yourself; you've stood it for thirteen years. And now, to-night, of all *possible* nights—when it was all but over—

CHRIS

Well—I couldn't help it.

MARY

—you have to go and lose your temper—*and* your head—and burst out into the very sort of assininity to set her thinking—suspecting—watching—who knows what? (*As* CHRIS *groans, averting her eyes, she pulls him straight again.*) Look at me, Chris! No, in the eyes! So! . . . Put your arms around me! (*As he obeys, with a slight awkwardness, his face a study in conflicting emotions.*) *Tight!* There! That's better. . . . Chris, do you still love me, as much as—

CHRIS (*between locked teeth*)

God knows I—I do!

MARY

Do you still want as much as ever to escape—all this?

CHRIS

Does a man want to—to—to—to l-l-*live?*

MARY

First then—kiss me. (*Giving way, after an instant, to a devil-take-it violence, he performs the office; then holds her away to gaze at with wild eyes. Tidying her hair, and always with one ear out for a sound abovestairs, she begins swiftly:*) Now pay attention, Chris. You say you've got the tickets, finally?

CHRIS (*scowling with the vehemence of his will-to-revolt*)

Yes, I have. And the steamer sails at nine in the morning, to-morrow.

MARY

And the passports?

CHRIS

Yes, yes, yes. (*His voice breaking higher.*) Darn it, it's all—I tell you it's all been quite thoroughly—thoroughly— (*His hands drop, his shoulders sag, his eyes, tormented, slide to the door.*) Where in the devil *is that boy?*

MARY (*sharply*)

We've got to leave here by midnight then. (*Glancing at the clock.*) That's settled.

CHRIS (*his hand straying toward the door knob*)

Yes, but if I knew where—if I knew what was happening to—to—

MARY (*biting her lip*)
There's the 12:27 from Chesterton; New York at three. With the car we can get to the station in a half-hour. Chris, there's *gas* in the car?

CHRIS (*jerking the door open at last and craning out*)
Oh, *darn* it! (MARY *opens her mouth, then, in place of saying it, shuts up like a bitter clam and turns away. Passing the table she picks up a magazine, returns to the divan, settles to read.* CHRIS, *discovering her defection, closes the door and comes around to her on guilty tiptoe. She continues oblivious. He clears his throat once or twice; then in a small voice:*)
Yes, there's gas in the car. (MARY *turns a page.* CHRIS *rebels, like the camel against that straw.*)
Now you look here, Mary! At the very least, it seems to me, you might show a little human understanding—

MARY (*marking her place*)
Beg pardon?

CHRIS
It seems to me, instead of lying down on the job—

MARY (*eyebrows*)
Job?

CHRIS
The perfectly brutal, fatal job of deciding *what we're going to do.*

MARY
It seemed to me just now I was being given to understand that you *had* decided—*against.* In a way it was a relief. After three months of backings and fillings—

CHRIS

Stop it! Mary Longbow, once and for all, will you, or will you not, be human? Will you try and have some little glimmer at least of how a man might worry—at least half-worry—for half a second—over the whereabouts of a run-away kid—hopping freights—and— (*catching her hands ferociously*). Oh, *please!*

MARY (*after a deep perusal of his eyes*)

Do you really *want* to carry it through? Really *want* to go?

CHRIS (*writhing for words*)

Does a man want—want—does he want—oh, Hell!

MARY (*softening, one eye on the clock*)

Well, then, let's see about it. Let's begin.

CHRIS

Yes, you're right, let's begin. . . . Wh-where? . . . (*Reminded by an incipient scathing look he shakes himself, juts his chin, strides to the door leading to the passageway.*) I'll want a hat, *anyhow*, won't I? (*Anxiety begins to betray him again and his attention has gone to the outer world. . . . Shaking her head, with an exasperated smile.*)

MARY

Chris, if you're going on *that* way! . . . Listen, please; let me ask you a question. Have you ever in your life known, or heard, or read, of anything happening to the boy that runs away? Say!

CHRIS (*his face long and red*)

N-n-no, I guess that's (*rapping the nearest wood three times with surreptitious knuckles*) probably true. Only I wish he were—

MARY

You wish he were here?

CHRIS

I *don't!* Gol-darn it, I told you once—I told Martha —I'm tickled to death he's shown enough spunk to—

MARY

To do as his father before him is desperately trying to make up his mind—

CHRIS

—to rebel! Revolt! Get out! Out into the world that's his by rights! Out into the big adventurous open spaces of—

MARY (*with a glance at the clock*)

I know; yes. So it's really for the best he's not here after all.

CHRIS

Best? I should say it *was.* Heavens! I couldn't have gone, and left Tubs *here.* It would have been too much like deserting a comrade in the trenches. I couldn't have! But now—now— (*Facing the outer world he lifts both arms in solemn finality.*) Now—let's go! (*Pulling the passage door open.*) I'll want a hat, anyhow. . . . Yes, and a coat.

MARY

Yes, and your bags. . . .

CHRIS (*wheeling*)

My—b-b-b-bags?

MARY

You don't mean to tell me you haven't got them *packed?* Oh, Chris! And you promised me, faith-

fully! And you had all the afternoon, all to yourself! And now—

CHRIS

Why can't I take my hat and coat and just—g-g-go?

MARY

All the way to—

CHRIS

All the way to *Freedom! Yes!* What the devil has the crease in a man's pants got to do with his soul's salvation?

MARY

All the way to Europe without so much as a toothbrush, or a—

CHRIS

Yes, but *how?* Good Lord! How can I get 'em *now*, with *her* around? (*Charging at* MARY.) It's impossible! Fantastic! It would be like one of those awful dreams where you're trying—you know—desperately—hopeless—hobbled—you know—

MARY (*counter-charging, gripping him by the shoulders*)

The trouble with *you* is that you *don't* dream. You never dream you can do things you never dreamed you could do.

CHRIS

Yes, but *that.* Packing for Europe under her very *eyes*—

MARY

Dream you can! Chris, if you love me as you say—if you *are* head over heels—if all this talk for weeks and months—

CHRIS (*fascinated, and knowing it, and terrified by the knowledge*)
But h-how? H-H-H-*HOW?* How do I go *about* it?

MARY
Hark then! Pay attention! For my part, I'll get Martha down here, and I'll keep her here—somehow—hook or crook—for twenty minutes by that clock. For your part, you dash upstairs and—

CHRIS
And—? And I—? Yes, and I—

MARY (*holding him off, studying him with a curling lip*)
By the by, Christopher, is it *you* that's running off with *me,* or is it I that's—

CHRIS (*reddening, ruffling, growling*)
I'm doing this.

MARY
Well, for pity's sake, then, *do* it! Wait; I'll call her down.

CHRIS (*putting her out of the way with a sweep*)
I'll attend to this. *I'll* call her. (*Going to the stair-foot he clears his throat. Glancing at* MARY.)
Twenty minutes, you say? By—by the clock?
(*Again he clears his throat. He shifts his feet. Puts his hands in his pockets; takes them out. Clears his throat again. Again.*)

MARY
Oh, Mar-tha! *Mar*—tha!
(*The sound of a door upstairs.*)

MARTHA'S VOICE

Yes?

(CHRIS, *flopping on the divan, buries himself in the magazine.*)

MARY (*sweetly*)

What you doing so long up there, dear? We're lonesome.

MARTHA

I was coming this minute. (*Descending, her arms heaped with folded under-linen.*) What mountains of clothes it takes to keep a family half Christian! What perfect acres! . . . *Where's* Chris? . . . Oh, *there* he is. . . . What luck, Mary?

MARY

Oh, he's milk and honey. Chris, look up and smile for the lady.

(CHRIS *uncovers a sultry grin over the magazine.*)

MARTHA (*passing to her chair*)

Really, Mary, you're too wonderful with Chris. How *do* you do it?

MARY

Well, I simply—I— (*With a sudden glint in the eye.*) I'll tell you the secret, darling. I simply make the most violent love to him. (*A distended eye over the magazine.*) This evening, for instance, I've had to go so far as to make him *swear* to elope with me. You'll find, Martha, almost any man, after —say—(*with a significant glance at the clock*)— twenty minutes of that—

(CHRIS *is on his giddy feet as the two join, soprano and contralto, in whimsical merriment.*)

MARTHA

And did he swear?

MARY

For twenty minutes by the clock—you should have heard him.

MARTHA (*with a humorous sigh, reaching her armful toward* MARY)

Thank Heavens! These go with him. (*Laying the pile on the table, and a little bag on top.*) And the buttons are in this. (*Sinking down with empty hands she smiles over her shoulder at* CHRIS, *on the bottom step, one-legged as a wading bird, confused, empurpled.*) There, you see, my dear, whatever happens, you're provided for.

CHRIS

All this—*assininity!*

MARY

Why don't you get out of hearing then? Go on with you, upstairs! . . . Shouldn't he, Martha?

MARTHA

It would be much nicer.

CHRIS

By Thunder, I *will!*

(*As he presents his back to mount,* MARTHA *jumps up and catches him, poking a finger in a gaping seam at the shoulder of his coat.*)

MARTHA

Mmmm! Lucky I caught that rip in time. Off with it, Chris!

CHRIS (*struggling*)

Le'me be! It's all right! That's the thing about

you— (*Silently, firmly,* MARTHA *peels the coat from him and carries it to her chair, leaving* CHRIS *more than ever helpless in his shirt-sleeves.*) Well, of all— *Now* what am I going to wear?

MARTHA (*pawing her basket for thread, her back to the others*)

Hark to the man! As if he hadn't another rag to his name! Do you know, Mary, I suppose if I weren't to help him find something—if I were to sit here for twenty minutes by the clock— (*This succeeds where all of* MARY'S *feverish shooing has failed.* CHRIS' *feet clatter up—three steps—and there he hangs again over the rail.*) Well, *he's* gone, poor man. Mary, dear, you've been such a help; so good for Chris this winter— (*Behind her,* MARY *sticks out a tongue of sudden malice.*) —I'm sorry we're to lose you now.

MARY (*her start echoed from the stair*)

Lose me?

MARTHA

Oh, I know, you dear girl. You've put off telling me—knowing well how I'd implore and protest—as always—but I happened to notice this evening that your bag was packed.

MARY

You notice *everything,* don't you, Martha darling?

MARTHA

Have you ever kept house? (*No answer. Turning her head she discovers the fascinated* CHRIS.) *You* still here? . . . Mary, what did I tell you—if I were to sit here twenty minutes. Here's three of them gone, and there he stands—

MARY

Dreaming.

MARTHA

Not even dreaming. Just dreaming he's dreaming. Men who really dream *do* things. It's the dreamers who accomplish the impossible.

CHRIS (*leaning far out, his face congested, his eyes aflame*)

And *you say that?* You say that *to me? . . . V-e-r-y w-e-l-l!* (*Facing upstairs.*) *Remember, please, that you said that.*

(*Jutting his jaw he takes two steps, pauses again, runs his fingers through his hair. . . . Returned to her sewing:*)

MARTHA

One thing about Chris—if ever he *should* elope—

MARY (*always shooing* CHRIS)

Would you mind so terribly?

MARTHA (*brooding into space*)

I should *die* if he—if he wasn't presentable. If I didn't know he had what he needed—going around among strangers like a tramp—cuffs cracked, seams out, and that battered old suitcase—he's got a beautiful new bag in the closet under the stairs, but he'd never remember it, not he! Well, if I had to sit here alone and imagine him, *my husband,* going around the world like that—it would prey on my mind. It's different with Tubs—at his age—though even so I'd rather he'd look Christian. I believe the next time he runs away I shall insist on his— (*Turning and spying* CHRIS *again.*) Dear me! Still dreaming that you're dreaming—

CHRIS (*his teeth locked*)
No, I've just *begun to dream!*

MARTHA
Obstacles beginning to melt away?

CHRIS
One has. It makes no difference though, now. What don't melt, I'll knock down.

MARY
Well, for pity's *sake*, then— (*In the passage the phone rings thrice.* MARTHA, *arrested, is about to return to her work; then a thought strikes her. Assuring herself* CHRIS *isn't going up, she rises and walks to the passage.* MARY *calls:*) It was three, Martha, not two.

MARTHA
I was sure it was two.

MARY
But I *know*—

CHRIS (*in a cold-blooded undertone*)
Let her go!
(*Entering,* MARTHA *closes the door. Her murmur is heard, as:*)

MARY (*hissing*)
Now!

CHRIS
I'm going, don't worry. . . . She said I *couldn't!* To my *face!* Said I couldn't *dream!* . . . We'll see. . . .

MARY
Well, you've wasted a good ten minutes—

CHRIS

It won't take me *five*, now I've started. And now I know where that bag is. If you can keep her here just five minutes—

MARY

Yes, but if I *can't*—

CHRIS

Dream you can!

MARY

I'll try. If you'd only *gone*—but now the difficulties—

CHRIS

Difficulties?

(*He makes a destroying sweep of the arm, and has taken one majestic step upwards when* MARTHA *reappears.*)

MARTHA

Oh, dear, it's mother again; one of her spells. She wants me to run over a "minute"—you know what that means—three hours. (*A sigh; then energy.*) Where's my coat?

CHRIS (*with a triumphant gesture toward* MARY)

There! What did I tell you?

MARTHA

What?

MARY

Oh—just that—that it wasn't about Tubs.

MARTHA (*taking the coat and work-basket and starting upstairs*)

It's early yet. Don't worry about Tubs.

CHRIS (*as she passes*)

I'm not. Did you ever hear of anything happening to the boy that runs away— (*As* MARTHA *disappears above; in a lower tone.*) —or to the man? (*Coming down to* MARY.) Difficulties? Obstacles? What did I tell you about *dreams?*

(MARTHA *comes downstairs, her coat on,* CHRIS' *coat under her arm.*)

MARTHA

I'll take my sewing and be back as soon as I can. . . . Poor mother. . . . But isn't it the luck. . . . Oh, dear. . . .

(*She has crossed the room and, as if impelled by habit, is tidying the desk, laying out paper, pens, and a book she gets from the shelves above. The others watch her, wagging their heads in almost pitying amusement.*)

CHRIS

What's all that for? Going to write a letter before you go?

MARTHA (*laughing at her own expense*)

I suppose it's because I always like things ready—for—for *any* emergency. . . . (*Going to the door.*) Well, children, try and be happy till we meet again. Be sure and put the screen in front of the fire, Chris. . . . Bye-bye. . . .

(*Exit* MARTHA. MARY *and* CHRIS *sink down, the one in* MARTHA'S *chair, the other on the divan, fanning themselves with anything handy.*)

MARY

Well, I'll confess, *that's* a piece of luck.

CHRIS (*rising to his height, expanding his chest*)
Luck? Never a bit! Unless you want to call it "luck" when a man— Well, you noticed it was the very second I got mad, and put my foot down finally, that the "luck" began. No, Mary, I've discovered the secret of life now, and I shan't forget it. *Dream your dream*—and to the devil with— (*He fetches up, listening. Outside, the beat of a motor is heard.*) Oh, *Lord!* . . . She's gone and taken the car!

MARY
Dream *that* away—if you can.

CHRIS
Wait! . . . Ssssh! . . . Damn it! . . . (*He runs his fingers through his hair.*) Wait till I— *There!* (*He points exultantly; outside the motor has stopped.*) What did I tell you!

MARTHA'S VOICE OUTSIDE
Oh, Chris!

CHRIS (*flopping on the divan, his face in the magazine*)
Yes?

MARTHA'S VOICE
I forgot to tell you—see that the cat goes out. And I guess I won't take the car after all; I need the walk. Will you 'tend to it?

CHRIS
Will I? (*Then aloud.*) Sure, Martha. And about the cat, too.

MARTHA
That's a dear! . . . Bye-bye. . . .

CHRIS (*mopping his brow with a shirt-sleeve*)
Like a charm, like a charm!

MARY

Yes, like a charm. . . . (*Thoughtfully.*) Mmmmm!

CHRIS

Well, it's done! It's accomplished! (*Springing up, his arms out.*) Mary, darling, at last we're—

MARY (*thinning her lips and holding him off*)

Accomplished? I like your idea of accomplished. Are we on the steamer? Even the train? Even packed?

CHRIS

All that is now—(*a magnificent sweep*)—inevitable! It follows! (*With compassion.*) You're nervous, though. . . . Wait! Watch me now! Sit there and count!

(*He dashes upstairs. Sounds of doors banging. As* MARY *listens, her eyes fall on the pile of underwear on the table. She studies it with growing doubt. Shouts of* "Are you counting" *from above. She strays to the door and listens at the panels. Drifts toward her own door, downstage, right, but then, fascinated, returns to the pile. She lifts the button-bag and seems to weigh it with rising uneasiness.*)

MARY

Almost *too* like a charm. . . . Mmmm. . . . I wonder . . .

(CHRIS *rattles down, hitching the last of him into a fresh dark suit, and waving a large, new, gaping kit-bag. Exhibiting the suit.*)

CHRIS

How's that for lu— for a dream? Laid right out on the bed just back from the tailor's! And this! (*the bag*) I'd never have known where it was if

she hadn't happened to mention it. (*Placing it on the floor and gloating.*) Now count again, and I'll show you how long it takes me to— (*Starting for the stairs, his eyes chance on the pile of underwear.*) Say! This is almost *funny!*

MARY

Almost—yes. . . . Where are you going with them? (CHRIS, *who has started upstairs with them, comes back, snickering at himself.*)

CHRIS

Oh, that's right; the bag *is* down here. . . . *You* stick 'em in.

(*Tossing them into her arms he is off again, and vanishes above, noisily.* MARY *stands staring at the kit-bag, from that to the pile, from that to the button-bag, from that to the door. Nodding darkly.*)

MARY

Almost—*too* funny!

CHRIS (*avalanching down, laden with collars, socks, shirts, etc.*)

It couldn't have been better if she'd planned it. Wash just home—day early, too—everything still around—nice little piles. (*Stuffing the bag.*) Dreaming! Say! It goes like a clock; I could do it with my eyes shut; it's positively *weird.*

MARY

I begin to think so. . . . I believe you'd better hurry, you know? . . . Listen, Chris; get your hat.

CHRIS

Yes—(*Crossing to the passage*)—and I'll want a coat— (*As he opens the door to go in he trips; picks*

up something from the threshold:) My *rubbers!* Say, it doesn't seem I could forget *anything!*

MARY

Not even your precious—rubbers!

CHRIS

By Jingo, though, there *is* something. A man can't just drop out without a word. I ought to leave a line, anyhow— (*As he approaches the desk he laughs, indicating the neat layout.*) For *any* emergency! If that isn't one of life's grim little ironies! (*He sits down, takes pen, furrows his brow.* MARY *laughs, her sarcasm half nerves, half bitterness.*)

MARY

Well, take your time about it; do!

CHRIS

But, now, what shall I—how in thunder do you begin a— (*His idle fingers riffle the leaves of the book left here. He eyes a heading. Suddenly turns the book over and looks at the back.*) Well, of all *the!* What d'you know about that, for a dream! Look, will you! "HALEY'S READY LETTER WRITER"!

(*Overcome by the humor of all this cosmic coincidence, he slaps his thigh and bursts into laughter. It is interrupted by* MARY, *plucking the book from him in a fury and slamming it to the floor.*)

MARY

You idiot! You simpleton! (*Clutching her hair; pointing at the clock; eyeing the door.*) Christopher Hume, if we're not out of here in three minutes— (*Lowering her voice.*) Listen to me. You've everything you need. *Close up that bag!* (*Dragging him,*

stupefied, to his feet, she is in and out of her room at a dart, bringing her own bag, a hat and coat. She sets the bag on the table. CHRIS *squats over his. As she pulls on hat and coat.)* Well—*why don't you close it?*

CHRIS

I ought to have a toothbrush—

MARY

Ohhh! (*Stamping.*) Listen, you *innocent;* if we're not out of here in two seconds by that clock we'll be—too late—

(*The last in a gasp, at a sound outside. They freeze, their jaws fallen; they wait, powerless to move. The door begins to open. It seems it will never finish opening. Slowly, sheepishly, a small boy's head appears. Enter* TUBS, *sliding around the edge. He has on overalls, green sweater, cap hind-side-to, and a khaki kit-roll dangling from his arm. Closing the door he stands with his back to it, eyeing them sullenly.*)

TUBS

Where's Ma? (*No answer. Advancing stolidly.*) Where's Ma?

(CHRIS, *wilting on divan, pats his hip pockets. In a rapt voice:*)

CHRIS

That's another thing I'll want—handkerchiefs. . . . Oh, yes—yes—she's—she's over at your grandmother's.

MARY (*into space*)

I wish I were so sure.

CHRIS (*up-ending, aroused to recollection*)
But what are *you* doing here? I thought you'd *run away.*

TUBS (*hulking down into* MARTHA'S *chair, bitter chin on fists*)
What's the fun runnin' away? Where's the good makin' a break an' startin' sumpin, when it's all started *for* yuh, 'n' all fixed? . . . Pa—where's Ma?

CHRIS
But—but I thought you were going West. Going to be a man! Herd cows and wash in water-holes and —and *hop freights!*

TUBS
Sure I was goin' to hop freights. I was over to Chesterton—I hiked there—and I was in a freight car standin' there, and I was goin' to roll up in my blanket for the night, like a regular guy, and then when I come to get my pack undone— (*Feverishly unbuckling the pack at his feet.*) —when I got it undone—look, will yuh! Look! (*A fold of whiteness at the core.*) A *nightgown!* Clean, too! An' look! Un'erclo'es! *Stockin's! Toothbrush!* (*From* MARY'S *throat issues a high, high note of mirthless mirth.*)

CHRIS
But how—how on earth—how did they come—

TUBS
Gosh knows how she ever got 'em sneaked in. I thought I—

CHRIS
I thought you *stole out!*

TUBS

I might 'a' *known* it was all workin' too much like a dream. Too much like a charm— (CHRIS *opens his mouth, shuts it, opens it again. A greenness comes over his face. His gaze passes from his bag to his suit, to the linen on the table, to his rubbers on the floor, to the desk, to the "Ready Letter Writer"; everywhere but to* MARY. TUBS *grows impatient.*) When's Ma comin' home, Pa?

MARY (*in mocking echo, daring* CHRIS' *eyes to meet hers*)

When's Ma coming home, Pa?

CHRIS (*with febril authority*)

Tubs, you go straight up to bed. Not a word now! Yes, I'll tell you when your mother comes in. Now march!

TUBS (*as he drags his feet up the first of the stairs*)

Aw, but Pa—

CHRIS

Talbot Hume!

(*He stands glaring painfully after the boy, his back to* MARY, *his hands knotted behind it.* MARY *remains motionless, her eyes boring through his skull into his giddy brain, smiling a thin, intolerable smile.*)

TUBS (*near the top*)

Aw, Pa—

CHRIS (*with sudden fatherly compassion; anything to escape* MARY'S *smile*)

You're tired, though, aren't you, Tubs. Maybe I ought to come up and—after walking from *Chesterton,* and on an empty stomach—

TUBS

Aw, I had supper; quick-lunch there. An' rode back in the train.

CHRIS

But—but you left word you had no money.

TUBS

Yeh, but there was a fi'-dollar bill stuck in that night-gown. Gosh, you'd think Ma didn't care if I run away or not.

CHRIS

Even to the *money.* (*Shaking his distraction; incisively.*) Tubs, go on up now, straight!
(*Begins to fumble his hip-pockets.*)

MARY (*cuttingly sweet, as* TUBS *vanishes*)

That's one of the things you'll want, isn't it—handkerchiefs.
(CHRIS *dashes a sleeve across his brow, starts to whirl on her, ends by shaking his head over his bag, in melodramatic dismay.*)

CHRIS

I've just now thought! It was what Tubs said brought it to me. Isn't it the *limit?* Mary, darn it! Damn it! We're stopped, after all. My pocketbook! The tickets! The *PASSPORTS!*

MARY

Yes?

CHRIS (*triumphantly*)

They were in that coat that MARTHA TOOK!

MARY (*the basilisk*)

But since you're such a potent dreamer, darling, perhaps you can—

CHRIS (*in an abandon of fury, clapping his empty breast-pockets*)

Good God alive, woman! What do you— (*His left hand pats more slowly; an awful look comes over his face. Reaching in he draws forth an envelope and a pocketbook, hypnotized.*) H-h-how did they get—h-how— Why, of course! When she took that coat upstairs—she'd want to clear the pockets—

MARY

She is *so* methodical, isn't she? . . . And now—since the dream is still working—like a charm—

(CHRIS *slaps his brow with a resounding slap. He shouts:*)

CHRIS

I knew! I knew there was *something!* (*He begins to stride excitedly about the room.*) It's been eating at me all evening: "Something you've forgot! something you've forgot!" . . . *Money!* Yes-sir! I haven't a—*red—cent!* I wrote a cash check this morning—was going to dash over to the bank—then something—and then this afternoon again— Honest! Honest to God! Mary, why do you look at me like *that?* Think I'm *lying?* Why the devil should I be *lying?* But look, if you want proof; I stuck the check away in this pigeonhole. (*At the desk, pawing, his face a study as he finds nothing.*) —Well—it's been mislaid—or—anyway, I swear—by all that's holy— Well, damn you then, *wait!* I'll let you see for yourself!

(*Drawing himself up he pulls out his pocketbook and opens it wide to show its emptiness. . . . A sheaf of crackly bank-notes is revealed.*)

MARY (*softly*)
Like a charm—

CHRIS (*saucer-eyed*)
Mary, I swear to you by—I swear by—by all I hold sacred— (*Gingerly, as though they were occult explosives, he starts to draw the notes forth, when a paper flutters out. He picks it up and reads.*) "To be remembered, important:—June second, life insurance to pay;—Eighteenth, fire, same—First week August, teeth gone over—early September, begin think Tubs' birthday—promised air-rifle—birthday twenty-fifth, so send well ahead—October eighth—"

TUBS' VOICE (*above*)
Pa, where's Ma?

CHRIS (*out of inner chaos, mechanically*)
Yes, yes, that's a good boy—

MARY (*with lethal amusement*)
And besides, now that he's here, you know, you couldn't. It would be too much like deserting a comrade in the trenches. . . . (*Perceiving that nothing penetrates, she shrugs with finality, and makes to remove her hat. Over her shoulder in honeyed irony.*) You and your wife wouldn't mind if I stayed on, just the night, would you? It would be rather a bother getting a train *now*. . . .
(*Still receiving no answer she snaps open her bag, and is about to lift it when something arrests her. Plucking out a book she stares at it. Aroused by her gasp,* CHRIS *approaches to peer over her shoulder.*)

CHRIS (*reading the title*)

WHAT THE YOUNG BRIDE SHOULD KNOW.

MARY

Now, where did that thing— (*Her face suddenly contorted; the breath hissing between her teeth.*) Of all the intolerable—all the cheap—the shallow-witted —*nerve!* . . . Ohhhh! (*Catching sight of* CHRIS' *purpling face, she shakes herself, jams her hat on, takes the bag, marches high-headed, flings open the outer door. With her back to* CHRIS *and the room.*) If you'll be good enough to tell your wife how deeply I appreciate her hospitality—

CHRIS (*embarrassed, guilty, red, foot-bound, tongue-tied*)

But, Mary—I—you—but listen—but Martha—but this is all—damn it—listen, will you!—

(*With one wild, vulpine laugh* MARY *goes out, slamming the door behind her.* CHRIS *sinks back against the table. Searches his pockets for that handkerchief again, his head wobbly, shoulders limp.*)

TUBS (*appearing above in his nighty; hissing down*)

Couldn' yuh phone 'er, Pa?

(CHRIS *springs up, goes to the passage, leaving the door open.*)

CHRIS' VOICE

One-nine-nine-three. Hurry it up, please. (TUBS *creeps half-way down, ears erect.*) Hello? Is Mrs. —is *that you,* Mother Randolph? Why—I thought you were—I'm *so* glad. Martha still there? . . . *What?* Not *been* there this *evening!*

(*The outer door opens and* MARTHA *comes half-way in, unobserved. An ear toward the passage, a quick*

eye for the bag, the fallen rubbers, the book on the floor, she withdraws, closing the door softly. . . . The receiver is hung up and CHRIS *appears, puffing, mystified. . . . Once more the door opens, briskly this time, and* MARTHA *comes walking in.*)

CHRIS

Martha!

TUBS (*charging down in a shower of slippers*)

Ma! Ma!

(CHRIS *catches her shoulders;* TUBS, *her waist.*)

CHRIS

Where—darling—where *have* you been so *long?*

MARTHA

That's a question *no* one should ask *any* one—in the spring of the year. . . . But where's—

TUBS

Ma! Oh, Ma! I took a bath!

MARTHA (*laughing*)

But where's Mary, Chris?

CHRIS (*laboring heavily*)

Well, you see—Mary said to give you—she was so upset—but you s-s-see—she had a telegram—she absolutely *had* to—g-g-*go!*

MARTHA

Oh, I'm *so* sorry. I so love having Mary—

CHRIS (*almost shaking her*)

Mary! Mary-Mary-Mary! Why always— Don't you care anything about *me?*

MARTHA (*kissing the tip of his nose*)

You poor blessed!

TUBS

Ma, didn't yuh hear? I took a bath, *all myself!*

MARTHA (*kissing the top of his head*)

You poor precious! (*As she is doing this,* CHRIS' *glance happens upon his telltale bag. He is petrified. Noting this, obliquely,* MARTHA *smiles, obliquely. Shooing* TUBS *upstairs and keeping her eyes definitely away from the bag's quarter, she goes to the desk and sits down.*) Give me peace for two seconds, dear; there's something, before I forget it. (*Biting the pen, musing humorously at the paper.*) I knew there'd be *some* emergency. . . . (*She writes, head carefully bent.* CHRIS, *holding his breath, rescues the bag and tiptoes upstairs to safety. When she is sure of this she sighs, folds the paper, and jabs it on the sticker.*) There! *That's* finished! (*Rising, she goes to her chair by the table and sits down again.*)

TUBS' VOICE

Ma!

CHRIS' VOICE

Martha! Come to bed!

(*Of a sudden* MARTHA *goes down, her face in her two hands, all a heap and a shiver and a sigh.*)

TUBS' VOICE

Ma, ain't yuh *never* comin'?

MARTHA (*rising, straightening, with a new smile, and starting up the stair*)

Yes, dear. . . .

CHRIS' VOICE (*muffled*)

Maaaar—tha—

MARTHA

Yes, dear?

CHRIS' VOICE

Know where my pajaaamas are?

MARTHA

Yes, dear. . . .

CURTAIN

THE GIANTS' STAIR

A Play in One Act

CHARACTERS

MRS. WEATHERBURN
TIL, *her sister*
BANE, *the Sheriff*
THE ONE AT THE DOOR

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THE GIANTS' STAIR

PLACE: *A farm at the upper end of a mountain valley, "The Giants' Stair," which descends by easy alluvial benches from amongst the high southern buttresses of The Footstool.*

TIME: *Late November of the present: an evening when, the false autumnal summer having come to a close, winter gathers its forces for the initial assault. A storm of wind and rain invests the shell of the farmhouse with a note insistent, mournful, and menacing, and from moment to moment, in a wilder onslaught, rocks the edifice on its foundations as if with its next to tear it from its granite bed and hurl it bounding and crashing down the terraced floor of the gorge.*

SCENE: *The farmhouse kitchen, a gaunt, high-studded, white-plastered room, modified by forlorn attempts at cheer in touches of colored muslin at the windows, one on either side of the central door, and by a pink crêpe-paper shade which warms the light of the kerosene lamp on the table at the left. A door at the right leads into the woodshed; above it, on pegs, rests a double-barreled shotgun. The kitchen range, flanked by cupboards, is at the extreme right; at the extreme left an ordinary wall telephone, the kind with a crank.*

At the rising of the curtain there are discovered MRS. WEATHERBURN *and her sister,* TIL. MRS. WEATHER-

BURN, *a large-formed, soft-footed woman, has been manipulating the dampers of the range. When she lifts one of the lids the new wood, kindling with a pent roar, as if some of the outer gale had got down the chimney and into the stillness of the house, casts up a ruddy light and reveals the face bent over it, a face fleshy and unlined, the lips set together solidly but without strain, the eyes widely placed and so serene of expression as almost to beget a doubt of them—as if their very bovine tranquillity might be suspected to hide depths of ardor or passion or bitterness which would seem too silly in the scheme of existence of a mountain farm. Brooding into the heat, her hand, still holding the stove lid, poised as if it has forgotten what it is about, she remains standing so for a moment, her back to her sister, seated by the table across the room.*

TIL *is physically almost the counterpart of the other, large, putty-fleshed, and colorless. Beyond this outer aspect the likeness fails.* TIL *is what would be called in Oriental countries "inspired." She sits motionless under the pink glow, her hands, pallid, puffy, inert-looking, folded loosely in her lap; her eyes staring fixedly ahead of her at nothing at all. She speaks in a high-pitched, unaccented tone.*

TIL

This is another of them nights, Abbie. Hark, Abbie! Hark to that tempest! It's one of them nights again.

MRS. WEATHERBURN (*idly*)

What nights, Til?

TIL

One of them nights when the giants comes up the

stairs to go on the mountain. Makin' a noise on the stairs.

MRS. W.

Goin' *down,* I should say, Til. The wind's from *up.*

TIL

No, giants goes against the wind. Don't you know that?

MRS. W. (*replacing the stove lid noisily, as if to put an end to that sort of talk, and glancing at the clock above the door*)

Mercy livin', Til, look the time it is. Past seven, and supper not yet gettin', say nothing of laid. (*Taking down a saucepan from behind the stove and peering into it for dust.*) It's a queer, funny thing. When John was here—

TIL

When John was alive—

MRS. W.

When John was here, I'd have give him a piece of my mind for bein' ten minutes late of six for supper; and yet now here it's *me* that's dawdlin'—lazin' and dawdlin' till all hours—now't John's away—

TIL

Now't John's dead—now't he's dead and gone for a ghost—ghost in the trees—'long with the dead giants' ghosts—troopin' through the trees! Hark to that wind, Abbie! (*In the instant of silence following, the telephone bell begins to ring. With each prolonged, shrill iteration* TIL *pronounces a name, like a child repeating in sing-song rote the rule of three. Ring!*) Banes'! (*Ring!*) Tolleys'! (*Ring!*)

Jetherses'! (*Ring!*) Whites'! Mis' White's, Abbie. Somebody wantin' Mis' White's. Who could it be wantin' Mis' White's?

(*Rising suddenly and softly, she steps to the instrument, lifts the receiver from the hook with furtive care, and puts it to her ear.*)

MRS. W.

Don't, Til! (*More hopelessly.*) Don't do that, Til!

(TIL, *on whose face the blankness has given way to a look of animation at once eager, willful, and sly, only puts her hand over the mouthpiece for answer, and continues listening.*)

TIL

It's Mis' Jethers, talkin' with Mis' White. Mis' Jethers says Jethers is havin' trouble with his growth again. She says the Pros'cutor was by to-day, and what can the Pros'cutor be snoopin' 'round this neighborhood for—unless it's about— *Oh!* (*She jerks the receiver from her ear.*) Oh!

(*She looks at it with an expression of malignance, wounded, bewildered.*)

MRS. W.

For Heaven sake, Til! What—

(TIL *replaces the receiver with a vicious click, and as abruptly goes droopy and appealing, tears in her eyes.*)

TIL.

They says I was *list'nin'*. They says that. Says somebody was snoopin' in, and they'd warrant the somebody wa'n't a million miles from the Weatherburn place. Abbie!

MRS. W. (*crossing to put an arm about her sister's shoulders*)
There! Don't you take on! Come, Til, you set down in your chair again. That's a good girl! (*Having pushed and petted* TIL *into place, she turns to the phone, takes the receiver, and after a moment's listening speaks into it.*) Yes, here's "somebody" again, May White. Yes, "snoopin'," Clara Jethers. Only 'tain't the same "somebody," happens. Yes, it was Til. My Til. And all I wanted to say was, I think two *ladies,* such as you, would consider 'emselves in pretty business, mindin' *Til!* Mindin' and mockin' such a one as *Til!* That's all. Oh, no, no, I didn't mean to be snappy, Clara. No, nor to you either, May. Only— No, I don't want you should think— How? Yes, 'tis. Blowin' furies up here. Yes, perfect cats and dogs. How? The *road* bridge! (*To* TIL.) Clara Jethers says the brook's so swole down her way that their hay bridge has gone out and the road bridge like to any minute. (*To phone.*) Don't tell me! Yes, I knew 'twas swellin', even up this far. When I was out to the chickens I hear it roarin' down to the meadow bottom. Dear —dear! I guess we sha'n't look to have many callers to-night, 't any rate. More likely to be callin' ourselves down your ways, house and all. (*Hastily, to the agitated* TIL.) No, Til, no; that was only jokin'. No danger of *that,* I guess. (*To phone.*) I was speakin' to Til. Yes, good night to both of you; good night. (*Replacing the receiver, she moves away toward the range, but halts before reaching it, and stands with her head lifted, harkening to the stream of the elements without. After a moment she speaks to herself.*) I wish John was here to-night.

TIL (*apprehensively*)

Don't say that! Not with *this—these!* They might hear you—and send him.

(MRS. WEATHERBURN *makes no rejoinder. As if taking herself in hand, she glances at the clock, tidies her apron, and is continuing toward the stove when a knock on the door brings her again to a halt, wheeling, startled.* TIL, *rising, open-mouthed, wide-eyed, stares from her sister to the door and to her sister again. As* MRS. WEATHERBURN, *shaking off her momentary irresolution, starts forward,* TIL *brings her up again with a whispering* "Abbie!" *The knock is repeated, and immediately then the door opens and* BANE *comes in.* BANE *is a stocky, hard-fleshed, red-complexioned fellow in middle age, a farmer out of a line of farmers; a man, one would say, without imagination. His cow-hide boots are muddy and his short overcoat sodden with water, as is the hostler's cap which he takes off as he closes the door behind him and blinks into the unaccustomed light.*)

TIL (*with almost a sob of relief*)

Why, it's—it's only Sheriff Bane!

BANE (*peering from one to the other, noting their attitudes*)

So, Til! And who'd ye 'magine I would be? (*Turning to* MRS. W.) And you! You're not still hopin', Mis' Weatherburn! Or—*mistrustin'!*

MRS. W. (*controlling a gesture of impatience*)

It was only you give us a start—to think of any livin' mortal being out to-night—

TIL

Along with *them as ain't.*

BANE (*ignoring her; to* MRS. W.)

Make certain I shouldn't've been if I'd know. It wa'n't anything like so bad when I start. I been up the mountain all afternoon on the lookout for them two young steers of mine, the red ones, that's been strayed since Tuesday night. You ain't see 'em, I suppose? Well, then, when it come on so all-creation bad, and I see the light in your window—

MRS. W.

And quite right you was, Bane. Look at you—drownded! Take off that overcoat and draw up to the stove.

BANE (*looking down at himself*)

No, thank ye; my boots are too messed. I'll just take a chair by the door here a spell if ye don't mind. (*Removing his coat, he hangs it over the chair back; then seats himself, his boots planted solidly apart, his cap hanging between his knees.*)

TIL (*gazing into space*)

What did them red steers of yourn die of?

BANE

Die of! They ain't died of anything I know of. Why?

TIL

I only thought 'twas queer a body'd be searchin' anything *livin'*—up this mountain here—to-night. Did you hear any of 'em round about you?

BANE

Any what? The steers?

TIL

The giants. Comin' up the stairs.

BANE

Giants! I *de*clare for the woman! Th' ain't no such things as giants *alive!*

TIL

No, they're all dead now—long ago, long ago. And then them other dead things—passin' up through the trees and the long grass and the bushes—troopin' up—

BANE (*furiously, to* MRS. W.)

What's she about? What's all this darnation foolishness about, anyhow?

MRS. W.

Nothin', Bane. Don't mind Til. It's like she's got it into her mind it'd be hard for anything mortal to get up the road to-night. We had a phone the bridge to Jetherses' is like to go out any minute. You'll hardly get home to-night, I'm afraid, will you?

BANE

Don't look it. I'll set here, if ye don't mind.

MRS. W.

Land, no! But you ain't et! No more've we. I'll put some eggs on directly—

BANE

I've et. Before I start—

MRS. W.

But I thought you was on the mountain all after—

BANE (*hastily*)

I—that's what I was goin' to say—only—only ye wouldn't leave me finish. Before I start *down,* I was goin' to say, havin' take a snack along in a paper. See?

MRS. W.

Oh! (*And after a perceptible pause.*) Well, you don't mind if we have ourn, Til and me? I was just gettin' at it—

BANE (*doggedly*)

No. But *I've* et.

(MRS. W. *takes up the saucepan from the stove and, again peering into it, again falls into reverie.*)

TIL (*reseated, her eyes blank*)

The first step in the stairs is Banes'. The next step is Tolleys'. Big, huge steps in the dark. It's feelin' for 'em with their feet in the dark makes the din. (MRS. W., *still brooding into the saucepan, has shifted nearer to* BANE. TIL *continues.*) The next step after Tolleys' is Jetherses'. That's a higher one. Some stumbles there.

MRS. W. (*in a resolute undertone*)

Bane, there's one thing I'd like if you'd make clear. When you come in you says to me: "Still hopin'?" and by that I take it you mean still hopin' it might by my husband come back. But it's what you says next I want explained. "Or *mistrustin'!*" Why'd you say, "Or *mistrustin'*"?

BANE (*confused*)

What'd I mean? Land! I never meant—it was more like a—a joke. Only—

MRS. W.

Only *what*, Bane?

BANE

Nothin'! Only— (*Straightening his shoulders and looking significantly about him.*) You been bright'-

nin' things up a bit since John was—was gone—eh? Them window curtains makes a difference now, don't they? John Weatherburn was never much on decoration, was he? And that there pink lamp shade. Makes the room a sight cheerier, don't it, though? And then the telephone. A telephone's a comfort, 'specially to the women folks, what with their gossipin' and egg prices and howdy-do's. I'm glad for you you got the phone in at last, after all these years it's been up the valley clean to your next door neighbor's. John was never much for contraptions, was he? 'Specially when they cut into the money. John was insured, wa'n't he?

MRS. W. (*in a level tone, facing him squarely*)
Is there anything in this valley, stick, stone, or straw stack, *ain't* insured, and insured as high's ever the agent'll let you?

BANE (*keenly*)
Why'd you say "straw stack"?

MRS. W.
Why shouldn't I say "straw stack"?

TIL
And then the next step is Whites', where the walls comes closer t'gether. And there's the brook to crost again, the roarin' brook, tumblin' and roarin' and takin' the bridges out in the dark—

MRS. W.
Bane, you never come here to-night *about steers!*

BANE (*rubbing a hand down over his face*)
Well, as a matter of fact— (*Blowing out his lips.*)
Set down, Mis' Weatherburn.

MRS. W.
Thank you, I'll stand.

BANE (*blowing out his lips again*)
Was a Mr. Cantpole by to-day?

MRS. W.
That's the Pros'cutor from Twinshead way, ain't it?

BANE
Yes, Cantpole happens to be Pros'cutin' Attorney; that's him.

MRS. W.
Yes, he was by. What's more, you know well enough he was by. Look here, Bane, speak out! Is it about —John?

BANE
About John—I'm 'fraid. About John's—vanishin'.

TIL (*in the same dreaming tone*)
About John's dyin'. About John's dyin' o' murder in the dark.

BANE (*wheeling in his chair*)
And how'd *you* know he was murdered, Til Jessup? *How'd you come to know?*

TIL (*shaken out of her reverie; dismayed*)
How'd I know? Why—why—I'll tell you how—I hear Mis' Jethers sayin' 's much—day before yesterday, 'twas—to Mis' Tolley—or leastways to Mame Tolley—Mis' Tolley bein' to Twinshead. Mis' Tolley's always to Twinshead Thursdays, ain't she? That's her day to Twins— (*The phone rings.* TIL *counts.*) Banes'! Tolleys'! There's for Mis' Tolley's now. Wonder who could be—
(*She half rises with a yearning glance toward the in-*

strument; then, remembering herself, casts an abashed eye in the direction of the visitor and relapses. The SHERIFF *passes his hand again over his face and returns his attention to* MRS. WEATHERBURN.)

BANE

I trust you'll believe me, Mis' Weatherburn, when I tell ye 'tain't of my own wish I'm here to-night.

MRS. W.

No, I s'pose not. But hark'nin' to all the gossip that's round—

BANE

No, 'tain't no question of gossip sent me. It's Cantpole. I shouldn't've moved of myself, same as I *ain't* moved before—

MRS. W.

Yes, I've give you credit for a deal of sense—till now. I says to myself, there's one man in the valley's got sense enough to know John must've just gone away a spell, somewheres—

BANE

No, Mis' Weatherburn, 'twa'n't that. For that wouldn't be *sense*. Don't think I blind myself. What manner of sense would there be tryin' to believe a man like John Weatherburn, a solid church-goin' man with a good farm and a bank account, and a fam'ly—that a man like that'd be changin' all of a sudden, one special night, and skippin' for it, no word to nobody and never heard of again? That's too much!

MRS. W.

There's queer things happens in the world.

TIL

There's queer things happens in the world.

BANE

No, no, 'tain't that. (*He looks down at his cap, which he wrings between his fingers.*) 'Tain't that. It's something—(*Putting the palm of his hand on the crown of his head*)—something here. Something settin' heavy, and sorrowful, like a weight. Mr. Cantpole never lived in this valley. I have. I've lived neighbors with you folks; you've been to dinner to my house, and me to yourn. I've known John Weatherburn since him and I was boys. Boy and man I've known him. Why, I was the last person to see him alive—the last that'll *confess* to it, anyhow. When he leave me that night, there at the bars of my top pasture—when I see him walkin' away in the dusk of that ev'nin'—if I had think—if I'd been able to know what was in store— Oh, dear! It sets heavy, Mis' Weatherburn. It's set so heavy on me I ain't been myself. The farm work's suffered; nothin' tended, nothin' done. And here's the Pros'cutor all the while: "When ye goin' to act, Sheriff?" And me settin' there to home, thinkin', thinkin': "Sorrow has come on that fam'ly up there. If I, Edwin Bane, was willin'ly to set out to add to that sorrow—" But to-day, when Cantpole was by, there wa'n't no "When ye goin' to act?" This time 'twas: "*A c t!*"

MRS. W.

So, you acted! (*Holding up the saucepan, she peers into it for the last time. She takes it to the stove, fills it from the teakettle, and sets it on. She glances toward* TIL. *Then, picking up the wood basket:*)

Til, would you mind gettin' me in some wood? That's a good girl! And wait! Take along this candle— (*Lighting a candle end for* TIL *as she takes the basket.*) For I want some good sticks this awful night. Good, medium-small, square sticks. Mind! Pick 'em careful, won't you, Til? That's a good girl! (*Ushering her out and closing the door behind her, she stands with her back against it, facing the* SHERIFF *in his chair.*) So, Bane, you acted! You come to accuse me of murderin' John!

BANE (*reddening*)

Not so fast! Not so fast!

MRS. W.

You come here to accuse me of murderin' John!

BANE

Not so fast! (*Rising and casting his eyes about.*) I come here, at Cantpole's orders, simply to—to have a look around. That's all. That John's gun up there? (*Taking down the weapon and balancing it thoughtfully across his palms.*) H'm'm'm! Good gun. (*Sniffing at the muzzle.*) D'you ever try shootin' this gun, Mis' Weatherburn?

MRS. W.

No, I never shot that gun.

BANE

Sure o' that, ain't ye?

(*The door is attempted from the other side.* MRS. W. *props her back more desperately against it, calling over her shoulder.*)

MRS. W.

Better wood'n that, Til! Better wood'n that! (*To* BANE.) What do you mean, Bane?

BANE

I just mean—I was just wonderin'—if 'twa'n't you—(*With a quick movement he "breaks" the breech, pulls out one of the shells, notes that it is empty, and, lifting the weapon to point to the light, squints through the barrel.*) Just wonderin', Mis' Weatherburn, if *'twa'n't* you, who *'twas.*

MRS. W. (*after a moment's hesitation*)

I'll tell you who 'twas. It was my husband himself. I rec'lect now. 'Twas the day before he—left. I rec'lect him comin' in with that gun, sayin' as how he'd had a shot at some quail up in the stone pasture. But he'd missed.

BANE

I don't doubt your word, Mis' Weatherburn, nor your rec'lection. Your husband may've shot this gun that day. All I want to say is (*holding up the shell*) he never shot *this load!*

MRS. W.

Why?

BANE

If your husband—or any other man—was to've shot this load, he'd've cleaned the gun after him. No man that'd shot his gun would leave it grimed and pittin' up like this. No, sir! He'd go to work and have his rod and rag out; that's what he'd do. (*His voice lifting.*) He'd give it a thorough cleanin', he would! (*Still higher.*) He'd set up all night cleanin' of it! (*With a vehemence almost of ecstasy.*) Cleanin' of it and cleanin' of it till it shine like the Gates of Heaven, he would!

MRS. W. (*abandoning the door to advance upon him*)

Bane, you gi'me that ca'tridge and that gun. They're my prop'ty, not yourn.

BANE (*thrusting the shell into a pocket*)
No, sir! Sorry, but I guess I'll want to hang onto these articles a spell. Sorry!

MRS. W. (*deliberately*)
Bane, what would you do if I was to tell you *'twas* me shot that gun?

BANE
Shouldn't b'lieve ye.

MRS. W.
Bane, what are you *at?*

BANE (*"hefting" the weapon thoughtfully*)
H'm'm. You and John been gettin' on well together these past few months? I don't know's I take much stock in gossip, but they do say John wa'n't always the easiest man on earth to get on with—to home. Good man—savin' man—but temp'ry—they say. And of course there's women with tempers, too—

MRS. W.
I sha'n't stand here hark'nin' to you—

BANE
Women with tempers, too. 'Specially out on lonesome farms—'thout telephones nor gossip nor sociability nor nothin'—tryin' to the temper that is. 'Specially after it's been goin' on some years—draggin' on—always the same—workin' on the mind and temper. 'Specially with a man to do with—a sober man—a savin' man—but—

MRS. W.

Bane, them ain't your words! Them ain't your ideas!

BANE

Grant it. They ain't mine. They're the Pros'-cutor's.

MRS. W. (*starting forward again*)

You gi'me—that—gun!

BANE (*warding her off with his free hand*)

Sha'n't! (*The door to the woodshed opens.* TIL *enters and stands regarding them stupidly, the candle in one hand, in the other the basket of wood.* BANE, *with an inspiration.*) Look here, don't let's bicker over the gun. Let's leave Til decide. Here, Til, take it! (*As he extends the weapon toward her* TIL *recoils, letting the candle and basket go. A screech of repugnance escapes her lips.*) What's wrong, Til? It's a good gun, ain't it?

TIL

Don't want it!

(*Recoiling another step.*)

BANE

Why?

TIL

Kills things! Murders things! All manner o' livin' things it murders and kills!

BANE

Then why'd you shoot it that time?

TIL (*falling into the trap*)

I—I don' know. I—I feel like I wanted to—to *hor-*

rify myself! Want to hear it *bang!* To—*horrify* myself!

BANE

And what did you shoot *at,* Til?

TIL

Nothin'. Leastways nothin' but giants and ghosts and the like.

BANE

In the dark?

TIL

In the dark.

(BANE, *appearing satisfied, returns to his seat, and, propping the weapon beside him, rubs his hand over his face.*)

MRS. W.

Ed Bane, if you pretend to think Til knows what she's sayin'—

BANE (*blowing his lips*)

I don't pretend to think, one way nor t'other. That's other folks' business. All I say is, don't be s'prized! When John's body comes to be found one of these days, hid in the bushes somewheres or 'nunder somebody's straw stack—I say—don't be s'prized if his head's found half blow off in the back with a charge of bird shot. Mark what I say, and don't be s'prized. That's all.

MRS. W.

Set down, Til. (TIL *obeys with a kind of bewildered docility.* MRS. W. *picks up the wood basket, deposits it by the stove, takes two or three sticks, and lays them in the fire. All her movements have grown*

lethargic. She recovers the candle from the floor and restores it to the shelf, and afterward stands staring dully at it. She starts to speak.) Bane!
(*The telephone rings.*)

TIL (*as before*)
Banes'—Tolleys'—Jetherses'—Whites'—Us! *Us*, Abbie! Should I—?
(*Half rising.*)

MRS. W.
Set down, Til. (*She crosses the floor, still moving with the same appearance of apathy, and takes the receiver.*) Yes, hullo! Yes, it's Abbie. Yes, what's wantin', Marion? (*To* BANE.) It's to your house, Bane! your sister speakin'. Would you want to—(*Back to the phone again, with a queer, new, tight note.*) How? *How?* (*She listens, standing curiously rigid, her face empty, almost stupid. After a space she takes the receiver from her ear, studies the rubber contrivance for a blank moment, replaces it on its hook, and drifts back to the stove. She starts to take up the saucepan, but desists in the act. She turns slowly to face the others.*) It's him.

BANE
Not—*John!*

MRS. W.
John.

TIL
Not—*livin'!*

MRS. W.
In the flesh.

TIL

No. (*Shaking her head solemnly.*) No, no, no.

BANE

John! Well, of all things! And me here, then, all for nothin'! But how come? Where's he to? Not to *my* house? Did Marion—

MRS. W. (*speaking in a distrait monotone*)

'Twas your hired man, Eggar, see him, Marion says. She says Eggar was up to the pasture just now, lookin' to get the gray colt in out of all this storm. He had a lantern with him, lookin' everywheres for the colt. He think he see somethin' movin' along the road, and, thinkin' mebby 'twas the colt had got out, he climb the fence there near Tolley's straw stacks—

BANE

Where?

MRS. W.

—by Tolley's turn where his straw stacks are—

TIL

Mebby he's been 'nunder Tolley's straw stacks. Seems I've hear somebody sayin' he might be 'nunder somebody's straw stack—

BANE

Nothin'. Go on!

MRS. W.

—where his straw stacks are, and then he see 'twa'n't the colt after all. 'Twas a man. Walkin' along, Eggar says, matter o' fact, his hat pull down and his shoulders hunched and his hands in his pockets, in the rain. Eggar give him good ev'nin', Marion says, and when the man give him no answer, Eggar throw

the light in his face, and he couldn't b'lieve his eyes first, when he see 'twas John. Marion says he speak to him again—ast him where he come from, and then ast him if he hadn't best stop in a spell till the rain let up, but John never says a word, 'cordin' to Eggar, but come on up along the road like a—a deaf man—

TIL (*musing*)
—dead man—

MRS. W.
He look wore out, Eggar says.

TIL
Wore out. No wonder. Wore out.

BANE
Well, I vow! Of all things!

MRS. W. (*glancing around her with a numbed air*)
I s'pose I better put on somethin' hot to eat, if he's comin'.

BANE
I shouldn't worry. He may be *comin'*, all right, but I doubt he'll *reach*, a night like this. It's too much for mortal man, the way the brook's swole, and the wind—

TIL (*absorbed*)
He'll reach. John'll reach. But he won't want for nothin' to eat, John won't.

MRS. W.
I s'pose I better put on somethin' hot. Le'me see, le'me see.
(*Wandering to the cupboard by the stove, she prods amongst its contents with aimless fingers. She examines the state of the fire. She takes three plates*

from a shelf and carries them to the table. Depositing them under the pink lampshade, she suddenly relapses into a chair. After a moment she drops her arms on the table, buries her face in them, and begins to weep without sound. TIL *remains oblivious to all this, her head lifted, attentive to the outer gale.*)

TIL

Hark to 'em! Hark to 'em come, makin' a moan and a drone and a racket on the stairs o' the mountain! All the things that's dead! The old things that's dead, like the giants! And the new things that's dead! Comin' against the wind! Hark!

BANE

Pester the woman! (*Turning his uncomfortable attention.*) Come, come, Mis' Weatherburn!

TIL

Hark to 'em troopin' through the long wet grass. Hark to 'em swishin' through the trees.

BANE (*jumping up with an exasperated clatter*)

Pester the crazy— (*Moving toward* MRS. W., *laying a hand on her shoulder.*) Come now, Mis' Weatherburn! Come! I know it's a good deal of a shock to ye—happy shock, of course—but a shock, all the same. But you've had your cry now, ain't ye? Now's the time to smile. Ain't ye glad John's turned out alive, after all? Eh? Ain't ye glad?

MRS. W. (*lifting her head and speaking with a curious vehemence*)

Am I glad? If you was to know *how glad!*

BANE

There! That's better! It's but natural a woman

should be glad havin' her husband back again, safe and sound.

MRS. W.

'Tain't that, Bane. (*With a quick glance at* TIL.) Til, I know what I'll put on for supper. You rec'lect that fowl I got hung for Sunday out in the shed? You go bring it in for me.

TIL

He won't want it.

MRS. W. (*sharply*)

Til, you do as I say!

TIL (*sullenly, rising*)

Don't like the dark. There's things.

MRS. W.

Don't be a scared cat. Here! (*Getting up and lighting the candle for her.*) Take this, then the dark won't be there. That's a good girl.

(*She stands facing* BANE, *as* TIL *goes out and the door closes behind her. After a moment he speaks.*)

BANE

What you mean, "'Tain't that!"? Ain't you glad to have John back?

MRS. W.

John's comin' or goin'—'specially after he's laid *this* on us to bear through—his comin' or goin' ain't apt to affect my happiness one way or t'other. That's what I mean, Bane.

BANE

You do speak out, don't ye? But you says you was glad he was—

MRS. W.

Alive! To *know* it. More glad and relieved than I can—

BANE

I see now! Then after all 'twas about—

MRS. W.

Yes.

BANE

—about Til! You wa'n't so sure's you made out, about Til. About that gun, and shootin' at ghosts, and all that.

MRS. W. (*giving way to the revulsion of relief; wringing her hands*)

I tell you true I didn't know *what* to think. Oh, if you'd had the bringin' up of that poor creature! If you'd had the worry of her and the shieldin' of her! and knowin' every minute you never know an atom of what was next in her poor wild brain! Oh, if you had! And then I was away that night, too; most an hour I was away, down to Mis' Jethers's. And then there's another thing. Til's fond of me. She's like a dog. I b'lieve she'd do *anything*—

BANE

Yes, go on. And mebby there was some special reason—mebby you and John'd had words or somethin'—

MRS. W.

We'd had words that day. John was his worst that day. Over my wantin' the phone. John lay a hand on me for the first time.

BANE

And Til see him?

MRS. W.

Til see him. Oh, if you'd had that thought weighin' on your brain, week after week! Oh, you'd know why I was glad!

BANE (*blowing out his lips, thoughtfully*)

I'm glad you been frank, Mis' Weatherburn. I'm glad you've tell me these things. I sha'n't forget—and I hope *you* won't forget—

MRS. W.

Ssssh! (*The woodshed door bursts open;* TIL *enters in haste, glancing nervously over her shoulder, the extinguished candle in her hand.*) What's wrong, Til? Where's the fowl?

TIL

There's things. They blow my candle out.

MRS. W.

Til! Where's that fowl?

TIL (*sulkily, still peering behind*)

He won't want it. Where's the use o' spoilin' earthly victuals— (*The telephone rings. Her facile attention runs to it.*) Banes'—Tolleys'—Jetherses'—Whites'—*Us!* Abbie! They've see him again. (*She starts sidling toward the instrument, half scared, half furtive, as if hoping she may reach it first.* MRS. W. *passes her and takes the receiver.*)

MRS. W.

Yes, it's me, Mattie. How? Speak louder. Yes, I hear now. Yes, I tell you I hear. (*She continues*

attentive. The hush in the room grows long.) Yes, I'm list'nin'. He wa'n't himself, you say.

TIL

Abbie!

BANE

Be quiet, Til!

MRS. W.

Yes, Mattie, yes, I've hear it all. Much obliged, Mattie.

(*Replacing the receiver, she half turns and stands staring at the door.*)

TIL

Abbie!

MRS. W. (*as to herself*)

What's ailin' of him? There's something queer.

TIL

Abbie, for *mercy* sake, say somethin'! Where was it —to Tolleys' this time?

MRS. W.

Yes, to Tolleys'. He's been by. 'Twas Tolley himself see him. He was comin' back from havin' a last look at the road bridge—that's gone and carry out now after all—Tolley was, when he met him. Mis' Tolley says Tolley got home in a sweat, as if he'd see a ghost.

TIL

Yes. See a ghost.

MRS. W.

Seems Tolley speak to him before he see who he was. He says to him: "Best stop back, mister; the bridge

is gone out above." Then, gettin' no answer, Tolley look closer and see who 'twas he was speakin' to. Tolley was so laid out for a minute he didn't know which end up. Then he think of the bridge again, and "John," he says, "if you *are* John Weatherburn, 's you seem to be, you best come back to my house along with me." But by that John was gone on up the road and disappeared.

BANE

And the bridge out, ahead of him!

MRS. W. (*with the new thought*)

Mercy angels! he'll walk straight in—

BANE

No, but he'll see—

MRS. W.

—and be drownded!

TIL

Ha-ha-ha-ha—

(*Her laugh rises shrill, tenuous, ironic, queer.*)

BANE

Pester you! Quit!

MRS. W. (*staring into the pink light*)

What's ailin' of him? Where's his senses gone? Where's he been to? What's he done? What makes him come on, come on, keep comin' on, never sayin' a word to no one, just comin' on, comin' on through the soakin' night? What is it—*drivin'* him?

TIL

Ha-ha-ha-ha-ha—

BANE (*in a fury*)
Goll pester you! If you don't quit that! What makes ye keep laughin' that crazy way?

TIL
It's the horror! It's the horror gettin' into my throat!

BANE
Horror? Horror o' what?

TIL
Him! Comin'! Comin' up the wind! Drove! Comin' up the road, comin' up the field, up the cow-yard, up the steps, comin' in the door there, takin' off his hat there, settin' down in his chair there 'thout a word with his back to us all, so's we'll have to see the back of his head there, half blow off, and straws stickin' into it—

BANE (*shouting*)
Straws? Where from?

TIL
From Tolley's stacks. Didn't you say he come from Tolley's straw stacks? I hear you say a while back—

BANE
Mis' Weatherburn, mark that! I call on ye to make note of that! I'll ast ye to rec'lect that!

MRS. W.
What on earth you talkin' of—
(*The phone rings.* TIL'S *voice drones in a note of fascination.*)

TIL

—Banes' — Tolleys' — Jetherses' — Whites' — *Us!*

MRS. W. (*who has the receiver with the last signal*)

Yes, me! (*After an instant she puts out a hand to the wall to steady her. She turns to the others, still holding the receiver to her ear.*) They've found his —body.

BANE

Where? (*Blanching.*) I—I demand you tell me *where?*

MRS. W. (*in the phone*)

Where? In the brook? No? (*Turning again.*) No, not in the brook. This side. This is to Jetherses' now. Joe Jethers see the body lyin' on its back in the mud down by their gate. He come back for Ed. (*At a signaling flutter in the receiver.*) Yes, Clara? How? Gone! You didn't say—gone? (*She hangs up the receiver and slowly turns.*) When Joe and Ed get back to the gate, 'twas gone. So it couldn't've been his bod—he couldn't've been *dead.* He must've just swounded there a minute—like's not—

TIL (*in the same eery note*)

Ha-ha-ha-ha—

BANE (*choking*)

I'll kill ye, Til Jessup! I'll strangle ye 'f you don't leave off that— Here! Where ye goin' *now?* (*As* TIL *moves, or, rather, seems to be pulled toward the door.*) Til, if you open that door, I vow— Quit it! Mis' Weatherburn, make her quit it, the crazy, ravin' thing! (TIL *lifts the latch with a trancelike*

deliberation, pulls open the door, and stands on the sill, framed by the darkness, cringing and hugging her body with her fleshy arms.) I vow! That's the end!

MRS. W.

What you carryin' on so for, Til?

TIL (*peering into the night*)

To *horrify* myself. I got to look. To *horrify* me. I see him! (*Crouching a little.*) Black as pitch it is, and yet I see him. 'Nunder the trees he is; 'nunder the meadow rise he is, and yet I see him—comin' on—comin' on up the road toward Whites'. (*She crouches yet a little lower. The backwash of the wind in the house's lee lifts the strings of her unkempt hair.*)

BANE (*almost in a whisper*)

That's the end! That's enough!

TIL

Comin' on, comin' on. He's up the hill to Whites' now. He's under the aspen trees, up by the lower gate to Whites' now. Comin' on under the aspen trees. In the black dark there, inunder the aspen trees at the bend; inunder the drippin' aspen trees. The dead eyes shinin' pale in his head, pale as ashes in his blowed-out head—shinin' pale in the drippin' dark inunder the aspen trees. You'd think he'd drag his feet, but he don't drag his feet. His feet's not on the ground. Inches above the ground his feet is, and he comes on floatin' against the wind, sailin' against the black wind and rain. Not against the wind! Betwixt the wind! Betwixt the flakes of the

wind! Comin' on out—out from inunder the aspen trees—

BANE (*who has been closing on her, step by rigid step*)
That's the end! (*Grasping her arm roughly, he drags her within the room and slams the door. He stands with his right hand spread against it; with his left he shakes an ecstatic finger in her face.*) Just for that, Til Jessup—to learn ye, Til Jessup—for that—I—here *and* now—I arrest ye, Til Jessup, in the name of the law—I arrest ye for the murder of John Partley Weatherburn on the night of—

MRS. W.
Edwin *Bane*, you crazy? What you sayin'? And him comin' there in the flesh!

BANE (*flinging around on her*)
'Tain't so! All a trick! What'd ye *think* the Pros'cutor'd been by to every house in the valley to-day for? All a trick o' Cantpole's doin'! *Pre*-'ranged, every mite of it! *Re*hearsed, every word of it! The whole livin' thing's a big goll-danged *trick!* There! Don't ye b'lieve me? Me? That was with him when he 'ranged it? (*Still receiving no answer of word or gesture from the suddenly quiet woman, he returns his attention to his prisoner, whose wrist he shakes.*) You hear me, Til? I arrest ye for the murder. Moreover, I arrest ye for goin' to work and concealin' the corpse—by your own confession, mind ye—in some one or 'nother of Tolley's straw stacks—where I and the Pros'cutor'll have a look in the mornin'—

MRS. W. (*bewildered, appealing*)
Bane, that ain't right! 'Tain't true! You're just—

just twistin' the poor child's words about—that's what you're doin'—to your own ends.

BANE (*wheeling*)

Own ends? Own ends, ye say? I'll ask ye to weigh your words, Mis' Weatherburn. I vow! Next thing you'll be accusin' *me* of—of—most anything! Accusin' *me*, the Sheriff o' Twinskill County! Of—most anything!

(TIL *stands as though untouched by all this, inert, entranced, staring at the door as if its panels were no barrier to her occult vision.*)

TIL

Comin' on swifter now, he is. Comin' on, comin' on. He's been by Whites' now, and they've see him. Mis' White's see him; in the light from the porch she see him. Now she's goin' back through the hall, white's a sheet. Now she's goin' acrost the dinin' room. Now she's to the telephone— (TIL's *head swings irresistibly in the direction of the phone. As irresistibly the others' gazes follow. The bell begins to ring.*) Banes'— (*She glances at* MRS. W., *who does not move.*) Tolleys'—Jetherses'— (*Throwing off the* SHERIFF'S *hand, she runs to the instrument and puts the receiver to her ear.*) Yes? Yes? Quick, Mis' White! Yes? Quick—

(BANE *is upon her. Wresting the receiver from her hand, he thrusts her aside.*)

BANE (*in the phone*)

Who's there? Hullo! Hullo! Who's there? It's me, Bane—Sheriff Bane—me speakin'. What? Yes, I hear! What? Hullo! Hullo! Dang it, they're gone again! (*Rattling the hook.*) Hullo! *Goll* dang the thing! (*With a sudden malignant fury*

he strikes the instrument from the wall, so that it hangs swaying from one screw, the wires broken.) There now, dang ye! Ring, will ye! Go on and ring! Ring! (*Turning around with a hand to his head, his eyes fall on* TIL, *back at the door again, holding it wide, staring out.*) *Goll* dang ye, Til!

TIL

He's on the farm now. I hear the gate just now. In the roar and moan of the wind I hear the gate. (*Lifting her voice to a nerve-struck scream.*) *John! John!*

MRS. W.

Oh, *Til!*

BANE (*advancing*)

Oh, *"Til"?* I'll *"Til"* her! I'll *"Til"* the crazy! (*Dragging her back, he casts her violently on the floor. He slams the door with a force sufficient to carry away the latch, which falls in a clatter of bits about his feet.*)

MRS. W.

You broke the latch!

TIL (*from the floor*)

You broke the latch. Now you *can't* keep it shut.

BANE (*deep in his throat*)

I guess I can! *I* guess I can! (*He stands facing it, his two hands spread against it, his feet propped out solidly behind. Silence follows, the clock-tick silence of the room enclosed in the outer shell of storm.* BANE *remains propped and motionless, breathing heavily.* MRS. W. *sinks into a chair and holds her hands crossed on her breast.*

TIL, *still on the floor to one side of the door, holds her head erect and attentive.*)

TIL (*after a time*)
That's the other gate. The near one.

BANE (*his breath rasping*)
I never hear a thing!
(*The hush runs on again for seconds.*)

TIL
You hear that, then? On the gravel? He's come out of the wind now. He's got his feet on the ground now. Hear that?

BANE
No! No! No!
(*Another moment.*)

TIL
On the step. There. Standin'. Standin' still.
(*The hush returns. After a space of it a voice becomes audible, racked, thin, almost falsetto. It is the voice of* BANE, *to the door.*)

BANE
Go 'way! Go 'way, I tell ye! (*Beating the panel.*)
Go 'way!

TIL
He ain't gone. Still standin'.

BANE (*after a moment, putting his lips nearer the wood*)
I'll tell ye somethin' there! Ye listenin'? I'll tell ye somethin'. I got a gun here. It's your own gun, John, and it's loaded with bird shot. Right here to my hand I got it. (*Removing one hand cautiously from the door, he gropes out blindly to the right,*

where the shotgun rests against the wall beside the chair.) Right here I got it, John! (*Finding he cannot reach it, he takes his other hand from the door, and is about to take the furtive, necessary step, when the door begins to swing inward, slowly. A cackle emerges from* TIL'S *open mouth; a kind of high, tight, tittering of the palate.* BANE *flings himself against the door again, slamming it tight.*) No, ye don't! No, ye don't!

(*A summons sounds on the panels, a muffled knock as of a soft glove.*)

BANE (*screeching in his throat*)

No, ye won't! Ye can't! Ye can't touch me, John Weatherburn! No, sir! 'Twa'n't my fault! 'Twa'n't! Ye oughtn't've called me a liar, there by the gate! Not with a gun in my hand! Ye oughtn't've dare strike me! Not when I had a gun in my hand! Ye ought've know me better'n that, John! Your own fault, John! Twa'n't m-i-n-e—

VOICE FROM WITHOUT

Open the door, Bane! Open, I tell you!

MRS. W. (*wondering*)

That's never the voice of John.

(BANE, *wilting and letting go the door, relapses into the chair and claps both his hands over his eyes.*)

BANE

It's Cantpole. Thank God! it's only Cantpole, after all.

TIL (*from the floor*)

John's went and bring the Pros'cutor along.

(*The door swings open.* MR. CANTPOLE *enters, re-*

moving his soft hat and shaking out the wet. He looks at MRS. W., *still seated in her chair.*)

CANTPOLE

Good evening, Mrs. Weatherburn. I just dropped up from Mr. White's place—as by *arrangement* with Mr. Bane. (*He peers around the door at the figure huddled in the chair there.*) So, Sheriff? Just as well I came, eh? What's all this I hear? Good *Lord!* What's *that?*

(*As from the tail of his eye he perceives something scuttling past him on the floor and out of the door.*)

MRS. W.

That's only Til. Til, where you goin' to?

TIL (*lost in the darkness without*)

To—*horrify* myself! (*And fainter, still further off.*) *John! John!*

CURTAIN

NOT SMART

A Comedy in One Act

CHARACTERS

MILO TATE
FANNIE TATE, *his wife*
MRS. PAINTER
MATTIE, *the maid*
MR. SNOW

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NOT SMART

TIME: *Late summer*

PLACE: *A Cape Cod village*

SCENE: *The living room of a typical shore cottage, the rented kind; outer door, rear center; door to kitchen, left; couch along wall, rear, left; writing desk against wall, right; two or three chairs, cheap stand, etc.*

Curtain discovers MILO *stretched on the couch reading a magazine, and* FANNIE *writing at the desk.* MILO *closes the magazine slowly, holds it away from him over the edge of the couch, with an expression of exhausted hopelessness, lets it fall to the floor. He groans feebly.*

MILO

What's the use? What's the use?

FANNIE (*turning a face, sympathetic but preoccupied*)

Something in the magazine, dear?

MILO (*sitting up and letting his feet hang over, speaks in a wearied, sing-song voice*)

The stranger's face in the throng—pale, alluring, baffling—with lips like the poppy—and that sort of thing. The wind carving her figure as in warm and sentient marble. Ankles, and so on. Perfectly inflamed, our hero pursues her, careless of the hereafter, reckless of the eyes of the world. Of a sudden, a vision of the Beloved—at Home, you know—right in the middle of the street—flaming sword sort of thing—and—and—I didn't read any further. I

don't need to. I know he'll turn around and go home, Fannie. *Home!*

FANNIE (*still busy with her letter*)
Fancy!

MILO (*starting up with a feverish energy and kicking the magazine across the floor*)
They're all the same. That's what's the matter with America! Pah! Where's that last copy of the *Weekly Varietist?* Heaven knows it's crude stuff, but still it—it— (*Giving up the abnormal effort, he relapses on the couch, crosses his arms over his head and goes on speaking to the ceiling in a tone of musing.*) Thank God—er—that is—the *gods*—nothing like that can ever happen to *us.* Isn't it fearful to think of having one's spirit cooped up between four narrow walls like that? No chance to soar, to feel its own wings, to work out its own ordered salvation, to—to— Well, you understand. (FANNIE *nods, without turning her head.*) Now *I* would have followed that ankle, wouldn't I? I would have followed it till it—till it turned to ashes in my—huh-hum— Well, you know. And then, when I came back to you enriched, bringing the spoils of a profound experience, Fannie—you wouldn't mind?

FANNIE (*looking up now*)
Mind? Why should I mind, Milo? Can a thing of that sort tamper with the essential quality of our relationship? No, no! We've learned better than that, you and I.

MILO (*sitting up again, with waxing enthusiasm*)
And you! You'll always feel quite free, too? You'll never let the silly, wicked little inhibitions—

FANNIE (*energetically*)
No, no.

MILO
Some day there may be a nice chap—I'd rather have it a nice chap—

FANNIE
Like Mort, say.

MILO (*with a slight start*)
Mort Painter? (FANNIE'S *attention has returned to her letter once more; she folds it, puts it in an envelope and addresses it.* MILO, *studying her with a light of uneasy speculation, goes on after a moment.*) I'm afraid it would raise a bit of the devil in the Painter house, Fannie; that's all. You know, Mrs. Painter isn't exactly—our kind. (FANNIE, *still about her business, rises and places the letter among others on top of the desk. After another moment,* MILO *breaks out in a tone of obvious relief.*) But he isn't home, you know.

FANNIE (*turning suddenly to face him*)
And *why* isn't he home? *Why* is he staying away so long? It's over two months now that he's been away.

MILO (*at a loss*)
Why—why—I don't know. He probably finds the fishing good down there in Maine, or wherever he is. I—I hadn't thought.

FANNIE
I had. Milo, there's something in the wood-pile, I tell you. Mrs. Painter is distinctly evasive. It's all so unnatural. We all came down to this corner

of the shore to have a nice, quiet summer. And then, of a sudden, *he* packs up and is gone over night—and no sign of his coming back. There's something behind it, Milo.

MILO (*rising and pacing the floor—petulantly*)
Pshaw-pshaw! There's the woman cropping out. You'll never see the mountains for the mole-hills, you women. Pshaw! Why shouldn't he go off fishing and stay as long as he wants to?

FANNIE (*ignoring the outburst*)
I've been thinking of nothing, for a week, but Mort.

MILO (*stopping short and staring at her*)
You *have!* (*After an instant of confrontation, he sits down weakly on the couch, mops his brow with his handkerchief, and then recovers himself sufficiently to resume in a tone tinctured with venom.*)
I must say, Fannie; this rather sudden interest in one of my very oldest friends—

FANNIE
You don't *mind?*

MILO
Mind? (*He has the grace to blush.*) Oh, m-m-mind? Why, good Heavens, Fannie; wh-why-why should I *mind?*

FANNIE
I knew you wouldn't. And after all, it's his wife I'm concerned about. Poor thing—stranded here all alone.

MILO (*more than ever ashamed of himself, mopping his brow vigorously*)
Whew! It's damned hot, I say! I think I'll have a

glass of milk, if you'd be so good, Fannie. That's a dear.

(FANNIE *crosses to door at left and calls out.*)

FANNIE

Mattie! Mattie!

VOICE (*off-stage*)

Huh?

FANNIE

Bring Mr. Tate a glass of milk—right away. And how many times have I told you to say "Ma'am," when you speak to me?

MILO (*deprecatingly*)

Why *should* she say "Ma'am"? After all, my dear, you know she is—

FANNIE (*turning upon him with some petulance*)

There are times, Milo, when your theories—

MILO (*quickly*)

My theories, Frances, are identical with yours, the only point of variance being that *I* am willing to practice them *at home.* (*Rising, he transfixes his wife with a didactic forefinger.*) We all talk so largely of the Brotherhood of Man. And yet here is a young girl, a really splendid sort of a creature in a way, living close to the throbbing heart of Mother Earth—

FANNIE (*interrupting*)

Close to the throbbing heart of the town dump, you'd better say. For all your fine talk, you don't know any more about her than I do, and that's not a blessed thing—not one single blessed thing, Milo. For all we know, she may be— Oh, for Heaven's sake, Milo, stop looking that way!

MILO (*resuming with a heavy, ironical patience*)
—living close to the throbbing heart of Mother Earth, feeling the life-pulse of the Cosmos—well—damn it all—she's precisely the kind of thing we write about and talk and make gestures about, the lot of us—*you* know. Only she *is* it. She *lives* it. She's got something we've lost. Sometimes, you know, my dear, I almost feel—I *do* feel—in a way—

FANNIE (*coolly*)
Yes?

MILO
A strange spiritual bond with that creature—something drawing me—irresistibly—like the pull of green things and the damp earth—weird—irrational—almost—ah—*Pliocene*. Swept on by the abysmal ground-swell of the stars—ugh—by the way, you don't mind?

FANNIE (*with difficulty*)
Mind?

MILO (*chin in hand*)
In a way, you know, she's got something or other that we— (*Enter* MATTIE, *carrying a glass of milk on a server.*) —Ah! (*With an unwonted energy he moves a small stand beside the couch, half-reclines, and waves* MATTIE *to deposit the glass on the stand. As she does so, he gently captures her hand in his. She endeavors to recover it, profoundly embarrassed, casts a frightened glance at the mistress, then, evidently deciding in her numb and docile brain that this is the accepted thing, remains inert, staring ponderously at her boot toes.* MILO *resumes in a tone of dreaming:*) I wonder if you've ever thought much

about yourself, Mattie? You wouldn't, though. You wouldn't—that's just the matter with *us*. No, of course you wouldn't. (*Turning to* FANNIE.) She wouldn't, would she? (*Turning back.*) We've been wondering if you knew how wonderful you are, Mattie. Because you *are* wonderful. You're out of your age. In a world staggering under a Freude and an Einstein and the break-up of the atom—you've managed somehow to slip back to the great, all-brooding fundamentals — Food — Shelter — Procreation—

FANNIE

Milo!

MILO (*impatiently, to* FANNIE)

That, I believe, is the order in which they come. Or —perhaps I'm wrong. Of course, my dear, if you want to get into philosophies and metaphysics—I grant you the old argument—does the hen come first and the egg second, or the egg first and the hen—

FANNIE

Milo! That is a *young girl!*

MILO (*with an air of hopelessness, shaking his head slowly*)

Frances, Frances, are we to be always like this? Always slipping back into the old fog-bound superstitions of the mid-Victorian home?

FANNIE

Oh, be quiet, please. It isn't *that!* You ought to know me well enough by this time. But—but she wouldn't understand. If she could understand—if it would do her any good—enlarge her life—*in the least,* Milo—

MILO

Understand? Of course she doesn't understand. Do we want her to understand, my dear girl? Enlarge her life? Make of her beautiful simplicity a groping and mumbling complexity? Like ours? Look here, my dear, I'm serious. That girl *has* got something or other that neither you nor I—or any of us in the—the group—could come to in a thousand years of self-centered mental and spiritual crucifixion.—She has got—

FANNIE (*ironically*)

Exactly *what?*

MILO (*inexpressibly shocked at the Philistine question*)

Why, *Fannie.* Why—why, she has got—she's got—See here, Fanny, you know what I mean, as well as I do. For Heaven's sake, after two years of our talks—our trying to find the—the—in our little group, you know— Look here, Fannie, you've talked as primitive as any one. And now you stand there and ask— (*Glancing out of the window, he speaks with an air of relief at the diversion.*) Oh, here comes Mrs. Painter, up the steps.

FANNIE (*in confusion, extending the half-smoked cigarette*)

Oh, quick. Take this!

(MILO *starts to take it, furtively; then, as if bethinking himself, draws back and confronts her with a grim disapprobation.*)

MILO

Fannie!

FANNIE

You *idiot!*

(*A knock is heard at the door.* FANNIE, *wasting no time in further argument, skips about in desperate search for a place to hide the incriminating object.*)

MILO (*even more sternly*)

Frances! Are we to be always—*that*—*kind?* (FANNIE *faces him defiantly; then, shamed by his superior sense of honor, puts the cigarette between her lips and puffs conscientiously. Knocking resumes.*) *Come in!*

(*Enter* MRS. PAINTER.)

MRS. P. (*with a moderate effusiveness—to* MILO)

Oh, good afternoon, Mr. Tate. I was just coming up from the beach, you know, and I thought I'd—(*catching sight of* FANNIE *in a cloud of smoke, she gasps, stares desperately at the floor, the ceiling, the desk; then sinks down in a chair*)—drop in!

MILO (*suavely*)

Terribly glad. When's Mort coming home?

MRS. P. (*ill-at-ease*)

I—I—he hasn't decided. (*In haste to change the subject.*) Hasn't it been a perfectly glorious—(*Suffers another shock as her eyes, turning, come to the pillar of smoke, and relapses.*)

FANNIE (*hastily, coughing as she inhales by accident*)

Per-perfectly *glorious,* really. Yes, yes. . . . When's Mort coming home?

MRS. P.

I—I—he hasn't— (*Looks from one to the other with a sudden suspicion; then rises majestically and*

confronts FANNIE *with an icy accusation.*) Mrs. Tate, your husband asked me that question ten seconds ago, and, if I am not mistaken, you heard me answer him. (*Bursting into tears and stamping her feet.*) Oh! Oh, oh! I won't stand it! Oh, you're so *mean*—always pecking at me and pecking at me—

MILO (*aghast*)
Pecking?

FANNIE (*the same*)
Pecking at you?

MRS. P.
Yes, *pecking* at me! (*She sinks down in the chair and, burying her face in her hands, gives way to uncontrolled grief. The others exchange inquiring glances, shrug their shoulders, and sigh with the helpless bewilderment of the falsely-accused. By and by* MRS. PAINTER *begins to speak, her cheeks pressed in her palms, eyes fixed on vacancy.*) I suppose you might as well know. You'll have to, some time. . . . Mort—is—never—coming—back!

FANNIE
What?

MILO
Old Mort? Good old Mort? For Heaven's sake, *why not?*

MRS. P.
You remember the maid we engaged down here the first of the summer? Abbie Small? Well, she got in trouble. Oh, yes, Mort denied it—and denied it and denied it. He would, of course. We got her out

of the way immediately; sent her up to the Rescued Magdalenes' Home in the city. We couldn't do less. I know the place; it's good and clean and wholesome —not at all like an institution. They have their amusements and things. And—and— (*She suffers a momentary relapse into tears.* MILO *begins to pace the floor, wrapped in thought. She resumes bravely.*) And Mort, when he found at last that the wool *would not* be pulled over my eyes, packed up his things and went away. . . . Perhaps it is best.

MILO (*wheeling on her*)

Best! You can say—*best?* My God! (*Noting her look of alarm, in a gentler note.*) You must forgive me, Mrs. Painter, but it just happens to be the thing nearest to my heart. (*Sitting down on the end of the couch, he goes on with the persuasive sweetness of the evangelist.*) You say it is best, by your lights. And by *my* lights, I say it is *worst.* Worst, because it seems to me you are missing the fundamental significance of life; that you are deliberately shutting the door on Life; that you are throwing away an— Experience! You three! Think of it! How wonderful a thing! Passing together, hand in hand, through the unfolding hours of a miracle! You three!

MRS. P. (*recovering the faculty of speech at last*)

Are you *crazy?* (*Appealing to* FANNIE.) Is—is the man—*insane?*

FANNIE (*with a smile half-sad, half-lifted*)

No, Mrs. Painter. It seems to me he is precisely—*sane.* We have been thinking about it a good deal, Milo and I, and we—

MRS. P. (*rising*)

Mrs. Tate! I can't say how *deeply* I am—I—really, I think I'd better be going.

(*She moves majestically toward the door.*)

FANNIE (*intercepting her*)

Now—now! Don't take on so, my dear. Pshaw! You mustn't go off in a miff like this—must she, Milo? See here; sit down and we'll have a cup of tea. . . . (*Calling.*) *Mattie! Mattie!*

MILO

Yes, yes—do please sit down. (*Calling.*) *Mattie! Mattie!* (*Aside.*) Where is that girl? (*To others.*) Wait a second, I'll go hurry her up. (*Exit.*)

MRS. P. (*sobbing gently into her handkerchief*)

But, my dear, my dear. You couldn't talk that way, either of you, if you had been through it yourselves —if you knew—if you knew the torment of that day—when that girl came to me and told me she wasn't smart.

FANNIE (*quizzically*)

Not smart?

MRS. P.

Yes. That's the way they put it down here—when they are—are—*expecting*—

FANNIE

How quaint! Not smart. Fancy. (*Enter* MILO.) Oh, Milo, my dear, Mrs. Painter has just been telling me the quaintest thing.

MRS. P. (*drawing up and recovering her dignity*)

It is a thing I should rather not discuss in—in—*mixed company.* Especially with *Mr. Tate.*

MILO

Oh, come now, Mrs. Painter. Don't let's quarrel over—over—abstractions. See here, we'll have some tea, and we'll all feel better. . . . Where's that girl? (*Enter* MATTIE, *a dish in one hand, dish-towel in the other. She stands staring gloomily at her boots.*)

MATTIE

Yeh?

FANNIE (*suggestively*)

Ma'am?

MATTIE

Mom.

FANNIE

That's better. Now will you bring the tea things—quickly.

MATTIE

Yeh—mom!

(*She remains standing there, however.*)

FANNIE (*sharply*)

Well?

(MATTIE *does not answer. Her lower lip sags, her knees bend a little, and the dish, escaping her nerveless fingers, crashes on the floor.*)

FANNIE

Good Heavens! What *is* the matter with you? Speak!

MATTIE (*dully, still staring at the floor*)

I ain't sma't.

MRS. P. (*avidly*)

Not smart?

FANNIE (*weakly, tottering a little and putting hand to her throat*)
Not smart?

MILO (*protesting expansively*)
Not smart? Dear creature! Oh, you beautiful, simple, primitive creature. Smartness! Pah! (*Turning on the others, savagely.*) Don't stand there looking at me so—aghast—as if I were uttering heresies. Smart? *We* are *smart*—you—and you—and I. And look at us. (*Turning back to* MATTIE.) No, no, my dear girl. You are *not* smart, and Heaven send you may never come to be smart, you, hiding in your soul something a thousand times more precious than smartness, an elemental wisdom as deep as the earth, and as—

FANNIE
Milo!

MRS. P. (*almost screaming*)
It isn't *that,* you fool. It isn't that she means by "not smart." Don't you know what it means down here? Why, it means that one is in a delicate—

MILO
Delicate? You say *"delicate"!* And I say, don't talk to me of delicacy! No, no, look at me as hard as you want to, there's something more priceless in the world than delicacy. That's one of the things that's the matter with us. Delicacy! Mental tenuosity! Spiritual fragility. We're immersed in it. Yes, I'll say it—immersed, bound about, chained down with the rococo chains of delicacy—all the vile little soul-stuffing inhibitions of soap and toothbrush, Chinese potteries, recherché nuances. Pah!

I see that I shock you. Well, I am willing to shock you, you, Mrs. Painter, and you, my dear Frances. But I tell you that if this girl here, this splendid, deep-bosomed, ox-eyed earth-woman, is not *delicate,* then as for me—

MRS. P. (*desperately*)
I didn't say *"not delicate"!* I said, *in* a delicate—

MILO (*putting his hand to his brow with a sudden new suspicion of light—very weakly*)
In a delicate—*what?*

MRS. P.
CONDITION!

MILO (*sitting down abruptly on the couch and staring into vacancy—after a pause—in a wondering whisper*)
C o n d i t i o n ? (*Tableau:* MATTIE *staring at her boots; the two women staring at* MILO; MILO *staring at nothing. By and by he turns his head, and starts violently as he meets the accusing eyes.*) What are you looking at *me* for? (*Seized by a sudden panic, he shakes wild hands at them.*) Stop looking at me! Stop it, I say! Stop looking at me! Stop-stop-stop-stop—! The—*idea!*

FANNIE (*in a choking voice*)
Milo! Oh—Milo, Milo!

MRS. P. (*with a stately sweep to the door*)
I am afraid I shall have to say—Good *evening.*
(*Exit in a blaze of glory.*)

FANNIE (*with great difficulty—to* MATTIE)
You may leave the room.
(*Exit* MATTIE, *her eyes still on the floor.* MILO *gazes*

after her, blank and helpless. As the door closes, FANNIE *sinks on her knees beside the desk and, hiding her face in her hands, shakes with the tumult of her woe, sobbing a muffled,* "Milo, Milo," *from time to time.* MILO *paces back and forth rapidly.*)

MILO

Frances! Ten minutes ago I would have called the man a liar who told me that you, my wife, had such a *low—suspicious—mind.* Do you hear me? Good God, Fannie! (*Receiving no reply he subsides on the couch and mops his face. After a moment he resumes in a harassed soliloquy.*) The world is full of low minds, I suppose. All about one, eternally ready to suspect the worst—greedy, worming, nasty things, licking their lickerish lips for a chance at a man's good name. Pah! (*He groans.*) . . . Of course, the girl must be gotten away from here immediately. *Fannie!* (*Still hearing no answer, he jumps up and moves toward her.*) For Heaven's sake, pull yourself together. See here! There are things to do; arrangements to make. We've got to use our *heads.* We've got to think for *three* now. This poor creature cannot be left here to face the sneers and the leers of these damned, narrow-souled provincials. She is, in a sense, a—a—dependent of ours. It seems to me we can't do less for her than to send her away some place where she will be looked after, cared for, understood—in the city—*Fannie; will you listen to me?*

(*Grasping her shoulder, not too gently, he tries to uncover her face. She uncovers it herself.*)

FANNIE (*with a suppressed fury*)

Please don't touch me!

MILO (*snapping*)
Stop it! Stop it, I say!

FANNIE
Don't—touch—me!

MILO (*retreating weakly*)
But—but I keep telling you—

FANNIE
Please don't keep telling me anything. I can't comprehend anything just now. My brain won't work. I think I—I am going—c r a z y.
(*She shivers.*)

MILO
But I *tell* you—

FANNIE (*ignoring him. In a tone of tragic weariness*)
To think that you, Milo Tate, could have brought yourself to this. Oh, I could smile, if it weren't so terrible, at the memory of what you have been to me—the Great Illusion. How fine I have pictured you! How strong! How sensitive! Fond, foolish creature! You were a god to me, without one touch of clay. And now—all that—g o n e ! Oh, I could laugh aloud— (*Weeps. With a sudden and scathing fire.*) *Fine? Sensitive? Agh!* That clod out there in the kitchen! That coarse, heavy, dull-witted *animal!* Oh! Oh!
(*She clutches at her throat as if her breath were failing.*)

MILO (*desperately*)
But I tell you—*it—w a s n' t—ME!*

FANNIE (*her shoulders drooping hopelessly*)
Denials! Denials! I think I might have been spared *this.*

MILO

But it WASN'T, you know!

FANNIE (*drearily*)

If you must make a brute of yourself, it might have been a lion—not a *jackal.*

(MILO *stares at her a moment, fascinated; then takes a dazed turn about the room. Somewhere in the circuit he discovers a little spirit of his own.*)

MILO

But if it *had* been, Fannie—

FANNIE (*in a sarcastic echo*)

If it *had* been—

MILO

You wouldn't *mind,* would you?

FANNIE (*shrinking back a step, as before an unfair blow*)

M-m-mind? (*And then with a terrible gayety.*) Mind? I? *Mind?* Ha-ha-ha-ha—

MILO (*relieved*)

Ah, that's better. That's more like my girl. I knew you wouldn't—even if it—if it—*had* been.

FANNIE

Ha-ha-ha-ha—

MILO

That's right. And now let's think. Have we got a time-table in the house, with connections? And, oh, yes, about that address. The what-you-may-call-it Magdalenes' Home. We must get it from Mrs. Painter. The girl mustn't stay here a moment more than is absolutely necessary.

FANNIE (*sitting down and regarding him with a new and glittering calm*)
What are you talking about?

MILO
That place in the city. Mrs. Painter thinks well of it.

FANNIE
What has that got to do with it?

MILO (*blankly*)
Why—why—

FANNIE
Of course, the young woman is to remain with us.

MILO
WHAT?

FANNIE (*blandly*)
Naturally. Why, Milo, how queerly you talk. We —you and I—are not going to miss the fundamental significance of life, are we? We're not going deliberately to shut the door on Life? We three? This wonderful thing?

MILO (*terribly*)
I must say, my dear girl, this is a poor time for facetiousness.

FANNIE (*untouched*)
We three! Passing together, hand in hand, through the unfolding hours of a miracle—

MILO (*ponderously*)
Frances, you are very unkind. You will never—understand me.

FANNIE
Understand you?

MILO

Not in the deeper sense. You are a woman, after all; a dabbler in surfaces. You still cling pathetically to the grammar-school notion that two and two makes four.

FANNIE (*unmoved*)

Ah? And that theories are to be put in practice at home?

MILO (*haggardly*)

Theories! My God! Theories! Ideals! Programs! Dreams! Ah, if one could but afford to dream! (*With a heavy wistfulness.*) But that is for the angels, and the young. Happy youth, unencumbered, foot-free—

FANNIE

All of which is to say—?

MILO

Hang take it all; my affairs are in a delicate condition—(*Flinches at the word*)—er—it's a confounded precarious period in my career, my dear girl. I'm just beginning to be known. Things are beginning to break my way. Another year, who knows, and I may arrive—if nothing happens. After all, we owe a little something to my career.

FANNIE

Ah! Your career!

MILO

And to our own folks—yours and mine. And—and —and to your—good—name.

FANNIE

Quite so—my good name. You are beginning to think even of that.

MILO (*in desperation*)

But I *keep telling you*— (*A loud knock is heard at the outer door.* MILO, *stepping to the window, cranes out, then, with a look of consternation, runs and sets his back against the door.*) It's that Painter woman. What are we going to do?

FANNIE

Do? Why should we *do,* when everything is so sweet and natural?

MILO

Fannie, are you *insane?*

FANNIE

No, I am precisely—*sane.* (*Another knock.*) Let her in, please.

MILO (*in a pleading whisper*)

Fannie! Fannie!

(*A louder knock.*)

FANNIE (*calling*)

Come in!

(*The door swings open after a brief struggle;* MILO *accepts sanctuary in its lee, still visible to the audience but screened from* MRS. PAINTER, *who enters, and after a suspicious glance at the panels, plops down in a chair and folds her hands.*)

MRS. P.

Well, here I am. I started to go home, and then I just couldn't. When there's any one in trouble—when there's a chance of any one's needing help—well, that's the way I am, Mrs. Tate. I said to myself, now if there's anything I can do, any arrange-

ments I can help them make, to get that wretched girl out of the way before the town is by the ears. Poor Mr. Tate, I said to myself—when all these rough fishermen learn the news— Oh, my dear Mrs. Tate, you don't know them. They're ignorant and uncouth, and you wouldn't think they had a spark of sentiment or honor in them, but when any one gets one of their women-folks in trouble—especially an outsider, like Mr. Tate— Well, I said to myself, weak as I am, if there's to be any harm done—any violence—

MILO (*who has been visibly wilting behind the door, bursts forth with an attempt at bravado*) Harm? Violence? What do you mean? See here! Pah! Do you imagine for one instant that any man, fisherman or no fisherman, can come around here bulldozing *me?* Have I, a perfectly innocent bystander, no protection against common *brawlers?* Is there no law in this community? Tell me that! Am I not a citizen of the United States of America? Tell me that! Have I no protection under the Constitution of this country? *I think I have.* (*Turning on his heel with a hollow majesty, he paces away from them—falters—speaks in a weaker voice.*) But I'm forgetting. That poor tragic creature can't be left here to face the sneering rabble. (*Turning to the others, he speaks in the curt, incisive accents of a man-of-action, a trifle overdone.*) I'll get a rig. I'll drive her over to the Junction—myself. By hurrying we can just catch the through night train. I'll take her up to the city—myself. I'll make arrangements at the—at the—Mrs. Painter, where was that place—?

MRS. P. (*in attitude of deep concentration*)
Let me think. Let me think.

MILO (*wildly*)
For heaven's sake, don't you remember?

MRS. P.
Let me think, I tell you. Please, please, don't keep hopping about that way or I'll *never* remember. Let me think: was it Ninety-third Street or was it Thirty-ninth Street—or was it ninety-three some other street—or thirty-nine—

MILO
But my *dear woman!*

FANNIE (*who has been watching them with an icy scorn—tapping the floor with one foot, but otherwise calm*)
I think you are both of you making rather—rather a spectacle of yourselves. You seem to overlook the fact that all this fuss and flurry is quite unnecessary—quite!

MILO
Unnecessary! (*Dragging out his watch.*) Good Lord, woman, look at the time!

MRS. P.
And this was such a good place, not at all like an institution. They have their amusements and things. If a girl *has* to go away—

FANNIE
If she *has* to go away—quite so. I agree with you. But you must remember that this is quite another

case, for the girl is *not* going away. She is remaining *here*—quietly—with us.

MILO (*going utterly to pieces*)
Frances, I swear by—by—I swear if you don't drop that pose and come to your senses—

MRS. P. (*with the air of one remembering—a sudden calmness—a cool, Cheshire smile*)
Why—of *course!* (*To* FANNIE.) Why, my dear, of *course!* (*To* MILO.) Oh, Mr. Tate, how stupid of me—and knowing your principles! I was—in the excitement and the—ah—danger of the moment—I was just being hopelessly middle-class. Why, *of course!*

MILO (*eyeing them with an elemental ferocity*)
All right! All right! Seeing that I can hope for no ordinary, common, human assistance from either of you, I—*I wash my hands of you!* Only please keep out of my way. (*Becoming ecstatically busy—dragging a hand-bag from under the couch—hopping about and stuffing into it the most absurd and unrelated objects—draperies, match-safe, etc.*) Please, I say, keep out of my way. (*Looks at watch.*) *Mattie! Mattie!* Where *is* that girl? Good Lord, she'll have no time to pack her things. And—and they might be here any minute!

FANNIE
Who might be here?

MILO
Please don't speak to me. (*Calling.*) Mattie! For God's sake, girl, are you deaf? *Mattie!*
(*Enter* MATTIE.)

MATTIE (*toward* FANNIE)
Yeh—mom?

MILO
Not *her—me!* Mattie, see here, hurry! Hurry! Don't keep standing there like a chump. Get your things together—just what you need. Throw them together, girl!

MATTIE (*bewildered—glancing uneasily at* FANNIE)
Huh?— Mom?

FANNIE
You mustn't take any notice of him, Mattie. He's—

MILO
Frances, oblige me by keeping quiet. (*To* MATTIE.) Now for the love of Heaven—hurry! You're going away. I'm going to take you to the city. We'll drive to the Junction, understand? Junction! Drive! City! Good God, what a bonehead! Going to *city!* Get that? It's a nice place—not at all like an institution—they have their amusements and things. . . . . City! Understand?

MATTIE (*still to* FANNIE)
Huh? Mom.

FANNIE
I told you not to pay him any attention. He's not quite himself. Of course, you're *not* going to the city at all. You're going to remain right here with us—right here in the house with us—we three—very quietly—until—until—

MRS. P.
Until your—your—you know—

FANNIE
—is—is—you—

MRS. P.
—*born.*

MILO
Damn it, she *can't!* I say she *can't.* (*To* MATTIE.) Tell them you *can't!*

MATTIE
No—mom. I can't. My—my old man wouldn't like it, mom.

FANNIE
Your father wouldn't like it?

MATTIE
No—mom. That's right, none of 'em wouldn't like it, mom.

MILO (*aghast*)
Do they— Good God—they don't *know,* do they?

MATTIE (*sheepishly, eyes on floor*)
Yeh—mom. I—I told 'em to-day. An' my old man—

MILO
No more! Not another word! For heaven's sake, don't stand there wasting time. Go! Go, get a hat on. You've no time to pack your things now. What the devil did you have to go and *tell* them for? They might be here any minute now—the whole pack of them. *Hush!* (*A sound of knocking is heard at back door.*) My God, what's that? (*Grasps* MATTIE *fiercely by shoulder and confronts her accusingly.*) *GIRL!*

MATTIE

I—I guess mebby that's my old man.

MILO (*groans; then straightens up and looks about him*)

The time has come to act. (*Steps hastily to window and peers out.*) No one on this side—yet.

MATTIE (*to* FANNIE)

Should I leave 'im in—mom?

MILO (*darting toward her and grasping her roughly by the wrist*)

You fool! None of that, now. Come! Hurry! We'll make a run for it the front way. Come along, I say!

(*Starts to drag her by main force toward the front door.* MATTIE, *aroused from her native coma by his violence and the savage expression on his face, struggles frantically, appealing to* FANNIE.)

MATTIE

Oh, no, Mom—no, Mom—no, Mom—

(*As* MILO, *dragging her, puts out his hand to open the front door, terror overcomes her and she begins to shriek incoherently. From off-stage—kitchen-way—comes the sound of a door broken in and deep masculine rumblings. Enter* MR. SNOW, *a fisherman, disheveled, wild-eyed, carrying a trawl-tub and armed with a gaff. At sight of tableau by door he draws up in the dramatic attitude of a tiger about to spring.*)

SNOW

Leave be with your hands there!

MILO (*letting* MATTIE *go and sinking back against the*

wall, staring with an appalled fascination at the intruder—weakly)

It wasn't me—I swear—I give you my word—it wasn't me.

SNOW

Wasn't *you?* You stand there and tell me it wasn't you? And me seein' you with my very eyes? Wasn't you, eh? . . . Mattie, come here.

(MATTIE *runs and takes exhausted shelter beside him.*)

MILO (*chattering*)

It *wasn't* me. It wasn't, it wasn't. Honestly, Mr.—Mr.—

SNOW

Stow it! I seen you, so stow it before I heave this tub at your head. I don't care who you are, I know what you done, I seen you doin' it, and I'm going to give you a lesson to chaw on, I'll be dumned if I ain't.

(*Advances menacingly.*)

MILO (*screeching*)

I didn't! Don't you touch an innocent man. It was somebody else did it, I swear by my honor. Somebody else did it!

SNOW (*showing first signs of puzzlement*)

Somebody else done—*what?*

MILO

IT!

SNOW

It—*what?*

MRS. P.
He means—got her in—in—trouble.

SNOW
In *trouble? Her? HIM? SAY!*

FANNIE (*breathlessly, plucking at her skirts*)
You didn't know?

MRS. P.
—that your daughter was—

SNOW
My *daughter?*

FANNIE
But she said you were—

MRS. P.
—you were her—old man.

SNOW
Old man? Of course I'm her old man. And she's my old woman.

FANNIE
You mean she is your—

MRS. P.
—your—your—

MILO (*uncovering dazed, transfigured eyes*)
WIFE?

SNOW
Well, for Cripes sake, now—what did you think?

MILO (*tottering to couch and sitting down*)
We—we simply didn't—think.

FANNIE
We didn't know she was—

MRS. P.
Married.

FANNIE
We all want to beg a thousand pardons, Mr.—Mr.—

MILO (*weakly—mopping his brow*)
Ten thousand! Ten thousand!

SNOW
Well, I don't know. Don't seem to understand. But I just come up here to tell you I thought best the woman should quit work now. She ain't smart, you know—

MILO
Yes, yes; that's all right. We understand, old chap. Yes, indeed. Good—good-by.

SNOW
Good-day to you all. Tell 'em good-day, Mattie girl.

MATTIE
Good-day to you—Mom.
(*Exeunt the two, somehow or other. For a time deep silence reigns.* MILO, *relapsed on the couch, veils his face with a handkerchief.* MRS. PAINTER *sits down in a chair very quietly, takes her cheeks between her hands, and stares at nothing. After a moment* MILO *summons strength to arise and stand mid-stage in an attitude convenient for his wife to cast her arms about him.*)

FANNIE
Milo! Milo! I've been such a mean, shallow little ninny. Oh, I can never, never, never, *never* forgive myself.

MRS. P. (*to vacancy*)
I wonder—I wonder—

FANNIE
Milo, Milo darling, look at me. I'll never doubt you again as long as I live.

MRS. P.
I remember now; it was 39 East Ninety————

CURTAIN

ROPES

A Play in One Act

CHARACTERS

PAUL WHALEN, *keeper of the second-class light on Black Blow Ledge*
JEN WHALEN, *his wife*
PAULINE WHALEN, *their daughter*
JIM PAINE, *the District Lighthouse Inspector*

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ROPES

PLACE: *On Black Blow Ledge, a solitary rock off the New England coast.*

SCENE: *The keeper's living room in the Light. It is a circular room, the bare, lofty, rough-plastered wall broken by, left, a round, thick window, brass-trimmed like a ship's port, and opening inward; and a large, solid door, center, also swinging inward, and disclosing, when open, a narrow stone platform, and beyond it the upper strakes of a dory swung from davits. A spiral iron stair, right, leads through an open well from below and winds up through the ceiling to the higher regions of the tower. At the extreme left an oil stove, food cupboard, a pump with a sink, and over the sink a small mirror and bracket lamp, make a sort of informal kitchen. Near the porthole window is a large, square dining table with a Turkey-red cloth, and toward the extreme right wall a small table, to which scattered papers, a small ledger, etc., give the appearance of a desk. Under another wall lamp behind it, so as to face the room, is a chair.*

In the chair sits PAUL WHALEN, *a big-boned, clean-shaven, somewhat heavy-featured man of perhaps thirty-five—an unstirring man with a gaze of curious and intense preoccupation. During a great part of the action he continues to handle or pull at a black brier pipe, as though, in the profundity of his reverie, he takes no account of the fact that it has burned out.*

At the dining table sits PAULINE, *a thin-legged child of five or six, eating her supper of oatmeal from a yellow bowl, but without appetite or industry, more intrigued by the litter of alphabet blocks, obviously homemade, heaped on the table beyond the bowl. They are unusually large blocks, the letters painted black on white. Neglecting her supper from time to time, she becomes engrossed in piling them in pyramids, until sharply reprimanded by her mother.* JEN WHALEN *is standing half turned from the table, her shoulders resting in an attitude of acquiescent dreariness against the inswung glass of the port, her eyes staring out at the sea, over whose rim the first shadow of a clear green dusk is beginning to creep. She is a woman who has been pretty—would still be pretty, indeed, were her hair done with some grace, her apron tidier, her blouse tucked in, and a light of animation in her eyes. She speaks in a monotonous voice, cheek in hand.*

JEN

And he said he'd known two or three cases like it, and they all come from the same thing—some kind of a fall or blow. He asked, and I told him, yes. It's a blood clot, he says, gets into the brain, just a certain place somewheres, and that's what does it. . . .

PAULINE (*reaching farther over her bowl, intent on the blocks*)

You talking about pa, ma?

JEN (*starting slightly and biting her lips*)

No, no! It's—a man on shore—that you never even heard of. . . . Tell her, pa.

PAUL (*seeming to arouse himself with an effort from his abiding lethargy, in a deep, slow voice, with an uncertain wave of the arm*)
Yes, Pauline; yes, yes. A man on—on the mainland off there, ever so far, that you never even heard tell of, Paulie.

PAULINE
What's his name, pa?

JEN
Let your pa be, child. He's not feeling well.

PAULINE (*holding the last block poised over a pyramid*)
Why d'you always say now'days that pa ain't—

JEN
Land alive, child! If you don't leave those blocks be and tend to your supper— I declare, I never saw the beat!

PAULINE (*relapsing into the chair and making a face at the bowl*)
Aw, ma! Aw! I've eat more 'n half. Lookie! See? Now can't I have some cake, please, ma? Can't I? I said "please."

JEN (*stamping her foot, her face contorted with impatience*)
You eat—that—up! How many times do I have to tell you?

PAULINE
Aw, no—no-o-o-o! Lookie how dry it is. I won't eat it up unless I can have some more milk in it.

JEN
Won't, eh? (*Then, with a shrug of weary capitula-*

tion.) Oh, well then. (*Lifts the pitcher from among the blocks, and finds it empty.*) By gracious! child. You're more *trouble!* (*After an instant's indecision, however, she carries the pitcher to the sink, takes from the cupboard a can of condensed milk, stabs it twice with a can opener, and lets it drain into the pitcher. Holding it with a sloshing motion, she pumps into it two or three gulps of water. Still sloshing it, as she carries it back, she peers in, sniffs at it, her lips twisting. Pouring a little into the bowl, her free hand falls on the child's shoulder in a gesture of sudden compassion.*) Milk? Heavens! child, who'll deny you *milk?* (*She dabs a forefinger in the flowing liquid and touches it to her tongue. She makes a face, rebellious, sardonic. She looks at her husband.*) Milk! Milk! And when I think! When *I* was a girl! *Milk!* That milk came from cows! And cream! And butter!

PAUL (*shifting in his chair and passing a hand slowly over his face*)

Yes, yes; I know. But—but she—she seems to come on fairly stout enough, don't you think, Jen?

JEN

Cream and butter! Yes, and eggs! And meadows! Meadows of land! Acres of land! Miles of land! Flowers to pick and grass to roll on, and children—oh, any number of children to play with!

PAUL

You like those blocks to play with, don't you, Paulie, that your pa made you for Christmas? Don't you, Paulie?

PAULINE

Only I want more. I want two more "E's," pa. Won't you make me some, pa?

JEN (*as if possessed with a sudden devil of wild, bitter mirth*)

Yes, yes, Paul! Make her some. You hear your child? Now go on and make her some more, make her some more—some more— (*A hush, broken only by the continuous muffled drone of the surf below, follows upon this unexpected outburst. Even the child sits motionless, dimly appalled, her eyes turned upon her mother, who resumes presently, in a lower tone, biting her lip.*) No, but it's got on my nerves to-day, though, thinking of Jim Paine coming out to-morrow on his rounds. And how ever we're going to go through with it! For it'll be even harder this time. Oh, I don't know, I don't know! It's got my nerves, that's why. I— Paul—I didn't mean anything. . . .

PAUL (*his eyes brooding into vacancy with a somber stare*)

I know; I know. . . . But you oughtn't to be here, Jen. It's a mistake.

JEN

Have I ever complained?

PAUL

No; but it's no place for you. Only, we've always thought, you know, that it wouldn't be a great while before we got shifted to a better berth, a bigger light ashore somewheres, where you could have friends and neighbors, and Pauline could go to a school, and where you could go to dances and socials and lectures

and things. You know, Jen, we've always said, "By this time next year!" . . . But—but—*now*—

JEN (*tapping the floor with her foot*)
Have I ever complained? Ever, once?

PAUL
No, you never have. But now, when it's come to this or nothing. . . . Till now we've always thought, "'Twon't be long before we get promoted—"

JEN (*going toward him, leaning with her hands on the desk, her eyes fixed with a half-contemptuous pity upon the man whose gaze continues to go on past her into the emptiness of space*)
Paul! Listen, Paul. Don't you suppose I know as well as you why it is we didn't get shifted to a better berth? Don't you suppose, with Jim Paine the district inspector—don't you imagine I could see why we're kept out on this God-forsaken ledge? Don't you? With *Jim* the *inspector?*

PAUL (*turning with a slight start, but not quite meeting her eyes*)
No, that's not fair, Jen. Jim and I run together when we were boys.

JEN
Yes; but when you got me, in place of Jim's getting me— Oh, don't you suppose I know—and that I know you know—and that you ought to hate me? . . . Well, go on and hate me!

PAUL
Please, Jen! . . . And you're wrong. No, no, girl. Jim and I run together when we were boys.

JEN (*with a fling of futility*)
Oh-h-h-h!

PAUL (*after a moment, his gaze returning into space*)
All the same, Jen, I'm not so blind—so—so dense—that I can't see plain enough now that you ought to have married Jim Paine—

JEN
Paul!

PAUL
No, Jen. It wasn't said in bitterness. But it's the God's fact of it. You ought to 've taken Jim—instead of being tied up to a—

JEN (*glancing sharply toward the child*)
Paul *Whalen!* . . . Your daughter's here.
(*In the awkward silence following,* JEN *shifts aimlessly about the room.*)

PAUL (*again passing a slow hand over his face*)
Guess it must be getting about time to light up—eh, Jen?
(*Going to the stair,* JEN *runs a finger down a printed card hanging from the iron standard, then glances at a small watch pinned to her breast.*)

JEN
Well—yes. Time enough yet. Though I might 's well be a minute or so forehanded, I suppose. . . . Paulie! For goodness' sakes! Now I warn you! If you're not through your supper when I get down from the light— Mind! (*as she goes up the winding stair.*) Mind!
(*Exit* JEN *above.* PAULINE, *after a few bites, falls victim again to the lure of play. There is a little*

crash as a tower topples under her hand. She glances uneasily at her father and takes a hasty spoonful of food.)

PAUL (*in a musing tone, staring at the desk before him*)
You do like those blocks, don't you, Paulie? You take a good deal of pleasure from them, don't you? Building and spelling. I wanted especially you should learn how to spell out words. That's fun.

PAULINE
If you make me some more "E's." Will you make me some more "E's," pa?

PAUL
Some day. Some day.

PAULINE (*with a sudden enthusiasm*)
Only I can spell some words, though, already. You watch if I can't, pa. Now, let me see. . . . (*Picking over the blocks, she arranges a file along the table's edge, the big, black letters spelling,* "I LIKE PA." *She claps her hands.*) There! Read that, Mr. Pa!

PAUL (*making a show of indecision ludicrous to behold*)
Well, well, well! Well, well! That's fine, fine, Paulie, my girl! (*Again the slow hand goes over his face and brow.*) Splendid, Paulie! P-perfectly splendid! Now—now something else.

PAULINE (*standing up in her chair, elated, but affecting cogitation*)
Let me think. . . . (*Her abstracted gaze goes out of the porthole window; she is abruptly alive.*) Pa! Pa! Look! The tender! Honest, right there, now, coming close aboard. Pa! Honest! And there's

Uncle Jim in the stern, steering. (*Rushing to pull open the heavy door, waving both hands down.*) Woo-hoo! Woo-hoo! Uncle Jim! Uncle Ji-i-i-i-m! (*Running to pluck at the unmoving man's sleeve.*) You hear me, pa? The tender! And Uncle Jim! (*Skipping to the stair to hail her mother, who is already hurrying down.*) Ma! Ma! Uncle Jim!

JEN (*breathless, her face oddly pale, her fingers tucking in stray wisps of hair*)
Y-yes. I—I saw him—up—aloft. Paul! Do you hear? Jim. Jim Paine, Paul!

PAUL (*his voice emerging with an almost startling calm*)
Yes, I hear.

JEN (*all the while dabbing at her hair, plucking off her apron, glancing distractedly into the mirror over the sink, etc.*)
But why on earth? To-day! And this *time* of day! It's almost dark! Paulie! (*Pulling the child away from the open door, where she is waving to the boat below.*) That's a good girl. Now you run along up to bed. Kiss your pa.

PAULINE
No, ma; no! Naw! I want to see Uncle Jim. Just a minute—a minute! He maybe brought me some—some candy—like once. Ma, p l e a s e!
(*She clings to the door. A voice comes up from without.*)

VOICE
Ahoy! Ahoy there, aboard the light! Give us a word!

JEN (*pleading*)

Paulie!

(*Enter* JIM PAINE *from the left, clambering up to the platform. He is a man of about the same age as* PAUL WHALEN, *but of a slighter and more active figure. Clothed in the blue, semi-naval uniform of a lighthouse inspector, the cap set at a jaunty angle on the black hair above the narrow, alert, good-looking face, the roving brown eyes and the full lips—under a close-clipped mustache—of a man prepared to accept the gifts of life—his appearance is in striking contrast to the unsprightly, monotony-worn presence of the dwellers in the Light. . . . He speaks in a free "hail-fellow" tenor voice.*)

JIM

Hello! Hello, Jen! Hello! Hello! (*His eyes, failing to observe the child who, turned shy now, hovers in the neighborhood, peer over* JEN'S *shoulder into the room.*) Hello! Where's Paul? Up aloft? . . . Oh, there you are! Hello! Paul, old man. How they coming? (*Without awaiting an answer, he turns and calls down over the platform.*) Below there! Hy! Fend her off the rock, and look alive about it! But stand by to heave in them stores when I get the door open below. (*Comes into the room.*) Paul, what you say you pile down now and break open that sea door in the storeroom, so the boys can heave in them canned goods and things? (*To* JEN, *with a quick, glowing smile—in a high humor.*) I guess—*Mrs. Whalen*—I got your whole list this time. (*Once more, with a hint of impatience, to the unmoving man behind the desk.*) Say, Paul—if you

don't mind—there ain't too all-fired much time, you know—and that sea door—

JEN (*swiftly*)

Don't bother, Paul. You sit and talk with Jim. He's kind of tired, Jim. . . . No, no; I'll run down myself. (*Then, pausing at the stair, prey to an abrupt misgiving, her gaze goes back to them. Her eyes fall on the child, still "hovering," tongue tied.*) Paulie dear, why don't you show Uncle Jim your nice blocks? Jim, let Paulie show you— Yes—go on. It'll please her.

(*Exit, hastening down the stair.* JIM, *turning back after a single half-hearted step toward the table, glances toward the stair and then, with a half-mystified contempt, at* PAUL, *who continues sitting empty-handed, brooding at the desk.*)

JIM

I see Jen likes to lend a hand.

PAUL

Yes, she—she likes to—to lend a hand—sometimes.

JIM

That sea door below ain't exactly a plaything, now. (*Receiving no answer from the heavy man, he draws up a chair, facing him.*) Say, look here, old man. Ain't you well?

PAUL (*with an effort at animation, staring at the ceiling*)

Well? Me? Oh, never better in my life. Now what made you s'pose— (*Chuckles laboriously, and falls to brooding at his two thumbs.*) Ah— Hm-m-m—

We weren't looking to see you out to-day—specially this late on.

JIM

Well, I thought I would. Moon to-night going back, and I thought I'd make a day of it and have a day off for the fair to-morrow.

PAUL

Fair, eh? Barnham Fair? So! I kind of wish Jen could— Hm-m-m— Well—

JIM (*glancing toward the stair*)

Jen having trouble with that sea door?

PAUL (*uneasily*)

No, no; it's all a knack, that door. . . . Hm-m-m! Any news ashore, Jim?

JIM (*fumbling his jacket pocket*)

That reminds me. Here's a paper. Boston *Herald*. Big fire in Chelsea. (*He holds out the folded paper.* PAUL *makes no effort to take it. Enter* JEN, *panting a little, from below.* JIM *turns to her with a laugh.*) Look at this, Jen. Honest to God, I believe your husband's turning poet or something. I offer him a paper—*a new shore paper,* mind you—and he sits there and dreams.

JEN (*hastening forward*)

Why, Paul! (*She takes the paper, glances at the headlines, then thrusts it into her husband's hands.*) A big fire in Chelsea, Paul.

PAUL (*burying himself in it*)

Big fire in Chelsea! Well, well, well! Now I want to know! What do you think of that, eh? Big fire in Chelsea!

JEN (*starting away, halting, turning again*)
As a matter of fact, Jim, Paul isn't feeling quite up to the mark to-day.

JIM
That so? And he's just now telling me he never felt better in his life.

JEN
Oh, well — it's nothing—nothing to amount — (*Swooping down with a sudden nervous energy on* PAULINE, *still "hovering."*) Heavens! Pauline. Off with you to bed. It'll be so dark you can't see. (*Almost dragging her to the stair.*) Here, I'll unbutton your waist. Now, no argument. No, no. Up you go! . . . Jim, here's Paulie off to bed.

JIM (*taking a tardy but sprightly cognizance of the child*)
Bless me! so she is. Why, Paulie, what a girl! Grows prettier every day. Every day!

JEN
Tell Uncle Jim good night, dear. Yes!

PAULINE (*halfway up the stair, winking back the tears*)
G'd night.

JIM
Throw me a kiss, you little divil!

JEN
Yes!
(PAULINE *does as she is bid with a jerk, stuffs her thumbs in her eyes, and disappears, stumbling and sobbing, up the stair.*)

JIM

There, there, now! How they do hate to go to bed. She grows prettier, though—more—grows more like her mother every day. (JEN, *her hand unconsciously busy with her back hair, avoids his long glance. He shakes his shoulders with a scarcely audible laugh and turns back to* PAUL.) So you're not too hunky, eh? Sorry to hear that. Let's see—last time I was aboard—three weeks back—come to think of it, you were a little off your feed then, too. Is it—has it been—

JEN (*thrusting in*)

Gracious! no. Ha, ha! You'd have him an invalid for sure. No, no; that was dyspepsia, that time. To-day it's just a touch of—of rheumatism. No, no!

JIM (*hitching his chair nearer the desk*)

Rheumatism, eh? I hope it ain't bad. Bad stuff, rheumatics. 'Tain't anything, I suppose, interferes with your tending the light, or—

JEN

Good heavens! no.

PAUL

Land a-living!

JIM (*with growing insistence*)

Nothing that keeps you from getting about?

JEN

To hear you talk!

PAUL (*laying down the paper*)

What's all the fuss, anyhow?

(*He yawns, stretches; then, as if casually, gets up and walks deliberately to the open door. As he steps*

out on the stone platform, JEN, *who has been watching him with an odd, breathless attention, calls abruptly.*)

JEN

Where you going, Paul? Paul!

(PAUL *gives no answer, but stands facing down over the edge where the waiting boat should be.* JIM'S *attention, leaving the man, turns to* JEN. *He gets up, leans on his chair back, coughs slightly. Before his frankly speculative smile the woman begins to grow confused and ill at ease. Flushing slightly, humming under her breath, casting about for something to occupy her, she goes over to the kitchen side, takes matches from the sink, and lights the bracket lamp.* JIM *has moved after her slowly, halfway, his hands in his pockets. The sound of* PAUL'S *voice from the platform brings him to a halt.*)

PAUL

Hey, Jim! They want to know below how long before you're coming.

JIM (*straightening a bit and passing a palm over his lips*)

Just a second, just a second.

PAUL (*calling down*)

Just a second, boys!

(JEN, *glancing covertly at* JIM, *crosses past him with averted face, still humming under her breath.* JIM, *catching up the tune under his breath, again moves after her slowly, with the air of one secure in patience. Having lighted the second bracket lamp on the wall behind the desk,* JEN *starts abruptly toward the door.* JIM, *as promptly, but still casually, moves on*

a diagonal to cut her off. Both halt and relax as PAUL *enters, out of the dusk into the light.*)

PAUL

I told 'em you'd be along in a second, Jim. (*Passing in front of* JIM, *he walks to the desk, where, coming too close, his thigh strikes smartly against a corner. He gasps and stands still. He mutters.*) Getting dark here. (*More loudly, to* JEN.) About time to light up, isn't it, Jen?

JEN (*in an odd voice, a hand going to her throat*)

But I have, Paul. I was up, lighting—remember? —when Jim came.

PAUL (*shaking his head, in the full light from the lamp before him*)

No; I mean here. The lamps. It's getting dark. (JEN'S *other hand has gone to her throat. Her face is ashen. Her eyes come with an effort to* JIM. JIM *himself is staring, half stupefied, at the patiently waiting* PAUL. *His lips open, but a sudden, imploring gesture from* JEN *holds him still.*)

JEN

Yes, Paul. Just a minute.

(*With a kind of frozen deliberation, she goes and takes matches from the safe, scratches one, rattles the lamp; crossing the room, she makes a dumb show of lighting the second lamp there.*)

PAUL (*sinking into the chair and taking up the paper*)

There; that's better. Thanks. . . . Big fire in Chelsea. Well, well! I want to know! . . .

(*In the following silence* JEN *turns to confront the inspector. Again* JIM *is about to burst out, but*

again the look, half imploring, half defiant, checks him.)

JEN (*laying her hand on her husband's shoulder*)
Isn't it about time to be having a look at the light, Paul?

PAUL (*after an instant's hesitation, as if groping for and catching a cue*)
Why, yes. Yes, dear. I'll run up and have a look. (*He puts the paper down, rises, and walks straight to the stair.*) Oh, by the way, Jim—going?

JIM
In just a—a few minutes, Paul.

PAUL (*climbing*)
Well, if you're gone before I get down, give our best to the folks ashore. So long!
(*Exit* PAUL *above. Nothing said for a space. The man and the woman seem to weigh each other with their eyes.*)

JEN
Well?
(*In place of answering,* JIM *goes to the door. From the platform he calls down.*)

JIM
Aye, below! Frank! Listen! Shove off a couple lengths and leave the anchor go. Clear of the rock there! No; it'll be a little spell. (*He returns with a deliberate tread to face* JEN.) *Blind!* (JEN *nods without speaking. The enormity of the thing grows on the man.*) Blind as a *bat!* . . . How long?

JEN
Almost a month.

JIM
You actually mean to say—when I was here the last time— (*The woman nods again.*) Well, if that ain't a—a hell of a proposition! You got to excuse me, Jen, but that's all you can say—a hell of a proposition! Think of it! The keeper of a *light—blind!*

JEN (*breathlessly*)
But—but *I* can keep the light. *I'm* not blind.

JIM (*tightening his lips, with an air of authority*)
No, nor either are you the keeper.

JEN
But, Jim, I've kept it. (*Coming impulsively from behind the desk.*) Hasn't it been all right? Jim! Say! Hasn't it? Hasn't it?

JIM
That doesn't make it any otherwise than my duty to report—

JEN (*running to him, grasping his arm, fairly shaking it*)
Jim, you wouldn't put us out! No! Not so long's it's all right!

JIM (*enjoying his position to the full; in a judicial tone*)
How did it come to happen?

JEN (*letting go his arm and wandering about the room*)
It came from a fall. He hit his head. That was one day. And that same night— It's a blood clot, the doctor says. Yes, I've seen a doctor. Rowed myself ashore and went to Hampton where I wasn't

known. The doctor said it was probably a blood clot got stuck in his brain.

JIM

And he'll be like that till—he dies?

JEN

Like's not. Or again, like's not, the doctor says, some day maybe all of a sudden he might see.

JIM (*weighing the thing impartially*)

One chance in a million.

JEN

The doctor said one chance in—in—in a—*hundred.*

JIM (*with a shrug of irony*)

Oh, well! . . . But it's all too bad, Jen. Fact is, it's no later'n yesterday I sent up a recommend for Paul's promotion to a better light ashore. Fact, Jen.

JEN

Don't lie.

JIM

I ain't lying. Honest to God I did. Why do you think I'm—

JEN (*breaking in fiercely*)

Why d'you never send it up before?

JIM (*hesitating; then deciding to meet ferocity with ferocity*)

Why should I? Tell me that! *Why should I?* (*He comes nearer and takes hold of her arm, almost roughly.*) Why should I? Tell me that! . . . Do you think I enjoyed it when I seen you going to him? Do you imagine a man like me likes to see himself get turned down? Before everybody? A man like me?

JEN (*half defiant, half ill at ease*)
He was your friend.

JIM
Friend? Sure! Oh, sure! and when I seen him taking you off home after the wedding I would have seen him burning in hell first. . . . You don't understand a man like me. . . . And look here, look me in the eye. The worst of it was, me knowing what I did—knowing you loved me better'n him. Knowing it was because his prospects looked brighter'n mine—*then!* Yes, you did. Don't shake your head. Yes, you loved me better'n him. (JEN *keeps on shaking her head slowly, and tries unsuccessfully to get her hand away from him.*) Yes, you did, though! You did, Jen! (*The woman continues to shake her head, as if sadly.*) You did, Jen! And look at you. Ever since I come to-night you been fixing yourself, smoothing your dress, patting your hair on the sly. . . . You did, and, by God! Jen—you still *do!* (*With an abrupt violence he drags her into his arms and kisses her again and again, heavily, on the lips. Putting her fingers into his eyes, she forces his head away, frees herself, stands back, pale and shaken, staring at him. He is silenced by her silence, but only for a moment.*) You did, though! You did! You did! . . . And on account of his prospects—Paul's prospects. Ha, ha! Haw! Look at the two of us now, him and I! Look what I could have give you now. I could have give you a life ashore, friends, gayety, dances—there was never such a girl as you were for a jolly dance. Was there, eh? Was there? And now look what Paul—with all his fine prospects—was

able to give you. What has Paul give you, Jen? Tell me that! *What has Paul give you?*

JEN (*turning her gaze slowly about the room*)
He has given me loneliness.

JIM
There!

JEN
He has given me loneliness. He has given me time —time to think—time—time! He has given me a chance to see my little girl grow up without a green field to run in or a child to play with. He has given me a blind man to look out for.

JIM
So there! Tied with a rope to a blind man!

JEN (*staying his triumph with a gesture as dead as her voice*)
He has given me pain and horror and grief. No! Wait! You don't know. We never intended any one should know. But, Jim, Pauline had a little brother. For not quite two hours, a year ago, she had a baby brother. He was born out here, two weeks too soon, with no doctor nor nurse but Paul. And it was Paul and me buried him in the water two nights after, when the tide was going out to sea. And that was a year ago to-night. . . .

JIM (*in somber triumph*)
Now, now; there! Poor girl. (*He edges nearer to pat her shoulder.*) I tell you it's a crime, girl, the devil's own crime, the way you been—

JEN (*staring at nothing and speaking as if to herself*)
Sometimes I've hated him. . . . It's like we'd got

turned out of everything. And now—we're going to get turned out even from here.

JIM
Oh, wait, wait! Not quite so fast!

JEN (*glancing up quickly*)
But it's your duty, you said.

JIM (*with a sly, indulgent smile, his eyes running over her*)
I know. But still—still— Listen, Jennie girl. Why don't you row ashore to-morrow? Eh? Why don't we take a little run over to Barnham Fair, you and me? For old time's sake. Eh? . . . Oh, yes, you will now. For old time's sake. Remember? Remember the dancing in the old pavilion—that afternoon? And Florrie and Frank were there? Remember? (JEN's *head is still shaking, but a wistful light out of the past has come into her brooding eyes.* JIM *takes her hand.*) Eh? We'll have another dance, you an' me, Jennie girl, for old time's sake.

JEN (*pulling back her hand*)
Jim, I can't!

JIM
You can!

JEN
Jim, I wouldn't do anything to hurt Paul Whalen—not for the world.

JIM
'Twon't hurt him. What a man don't know can't hurt him. Can it? You just say you're going to see that doctor again.

JEN (*still tugging at her hand, almost sobbing*)
I can't, I can't.

JIM (*after an instant's pause, shifting to sternness*)
Look here; I guess you *can*. . . . You say you don't want to hurt Paul. Well, there's more ways of hurting Paul than one. Think *that* over!

JEN (*staring at him*)
What do you mean?

JIM
Don't look at me that way. 'Tain't my fault. But unless a man's got something else important to occupy his mind—well—it's pretty hard for a man to forget what his duty is.
(*Enter* PAUL *on the upper stair.*)

PAUL (*echoing, troubled, suspicious*)
Duty? Duty? (*He comes down another step or so and hesitates again.*) What's all this about duty? A—a man's forgetting what his duty is?

JIM (*in an awkward position*)
As a matter of fact, Paul, it was—it was about—

JEN (*with a gesture of imploration, grasping* JIM's *hands*)
It was about—about that—that stock list—Paul!

JIM (*smiling into her eyes*)
Yes, that stock list. By rights, you know, you ought to have had it ready for me this time. The quarter's stock list. The law says—

PAUL (*descending to take his chair again—with obvious relief*)
Oh, yes, I know; it should be ready. I haven't been

well. Next time, though, sure enough. That be all right, Jim?

JIM (*still smiling expectantly into the eyes of the woman, whose hands he holds tightly*)
Well—

JEN (*in a low tone*)
Thank you.

PAUL (*taking up the paper*)
Big fire in Chelsea! Hm-m-m! I want to know!
(JEN *has disengaged her hands and retreated, her eyes downcast.* JIM, *defrauded, motions her back to him. She persists in not seeing it. He gives over and thrusts his hands into his pockets. A grin moves his lips. He coughs slightly.*)

JIM
By the way, Paul, ever thought any of getting out of the service?

PAUL (*the paper crackling under his suddenly tightened fingers*)
What makes you ask that, Jim?
(JEN, *like a played fish, comes back to the playing hand, but now, to make a still finer game of it, he turns away, keeping her in suspense.*)

JIM
Oh, I was just wondering—just wondering— (*He pauses by the dining table, his eye taken by* PAULINE'S "I LIKE PA." *His idle fingers jumble the blocks. He steals a glance at the tormented* JEN.) I was just wondering, Paul. Sometimes it seems to me a fellow like you would want a change. Something more exciting than tending light, maybe.

PAUL

No. That is—no—it's not too exciting, I grant you. But— (*Laying the paper down, he goes on, like a man drifting into soliloquy.*) No, I don't know as I'd much like to get out. Maybe it wouldn't be so exciting for you, Jim, tending a light, nor for another man. But with me—well, it's different—well, my father kept a light before me. Minot's Ledge he kept. I was born in Minot's Ledge. You ever know that? (JIM, *his back to the room, makes no answer. His attention has gone to the blocks, with which his fingers are busy.* JEN'S *gaze hovers between the two.*) Well, I was. And, from the first I can remember, I can remember my father—a huge, big man with a brown beard—I can remember him standing up there on the walk-around of an evening, after the light was lit, watching the craft go by. All the craft in the world, it seemed to me—all the steamers and ships and barks and brigs and schooners from all the ends of the Seven Seas—coming in safe past the light to Boston port. And he knew 'em, my father did—just by the peep of a funnel or the set of a skys'l—he knew 'em by name—and where they hailed from. . . . "Coming safe and clear!" he used to say, as if he was talking to 'em, "Coming safe and clear!" . . . Exciting? You ask me if that's exciting? Well, sometimes, if I was restless at night, if I crept up there late, or in the dark of the morning—there's my father always on the walk-around. "Coming safe and clear—safe and clear!" Or when there was a gale—on a night of a gale of wind—if you could have seen my father then! "Come clear! Come safe and clear!" He'd call 'em by name, like children. (*Coming to himself, with an abrupt return*

of self-consciousness.) No—no—I don't think I—I'd like to change.

JIM (*in a high abstraction*)
I was just wondering. . . . (*Taking between his palms the column of blocks he has been arranging, flipping them over deftly and silently to face the room, and with a finger tip separating the words, he steps aside, displaying to* JEN, *with a portentous wink, his handiwork,* "KISS ME AGAIN JEN." *The audacity of it takes the woman's breath away. She rubs her eyes. Her gaze comes with a curious, painful fascination to* JIM'S *right forefinger which, with a slow, imperious wagging, bids her come. Looking at* PAUL, *he repeats:*) Just wondering—just wondering. . . . But supposing sometime there should be something—well, for instance, this ailment of yours now— (JEN *breaks forward a step. Then her eyes go back to* PAUL. *Before the expressionless, but yet somehow troubled, face of that blind watcher an awful confusion stays her.* JIM, *waiting, smiles indulgently. He speaks out boldly in assurance.*) What a man don't know can't hurt him.

PAUL (*groping in mysteries*)
Wha-what's that, Jim?

JIM (*bringing* JEN *another rigid step with his wagging finger*)
I was just saying—thinking out loud—it would be awful now—(*with another portentous wink*)—if we could know everything that was ever going to happen to us. Eh? (*Reaching out to tap the commanding*

blocks, "KISS ME AGAIN JEN":) These are nice blocks. You make 'em, Paul? I always liked to play with blocks. You like to play with blocks, Jen? Eh?

(JEN, *coming another step, moistens her lips.*)

PAUL (*with growing nervousness*)
Jen! Jen, Jim asked you a question!

JEN
Y-yes. Yes, blocks are n-n-nice—nice for little girls.

JIM (*with a laugh and wink of delight*)
For little girls! Yes, for little girls! Little girlies! (*As she falters and casts yet another glance back at* PAUL:) I suppose really it's my duty—

PAUL (*half rising, leaning heavily on the desk, his face working*)
Duty, again! Duty, duty! Jim, what's all this about duty? (JEN *has come close to* JIM. *He makes no move; secure, he simply waits.* PAUL'S *voice lifts another note, shaken by some inscrutable instinct of dread.*) What duty? Why are you staying so long, when you were going "in a second"? Why don't you answer me? Now!

(JEN, *taking sudden rough hold of* JIM'S *shoulders, dabs a kiss on his cheek. With a mute laugh, he catches her around the waist and holds her.*)

JIM (*petting her hair and cheek*)
Duty, Paul? Why—why, I was just thinking, as a friend of you—both— Well, see here, Paul. Tending light may be all very well for you, seeing's you were brought up to it. But how about the little woman? *She wasn't!* Have you ever thought—

PAUL (*rocking his shoulders as if in pain to batter down the bars of blindness*)
Have I ever thought? Have I *thought?* Lord a-livin'! *Have I thought?* (*Abandoning the chair, like a man driven from his anchorage by a dark wind, he casts heavily about the room. Once he comes toward the two.* JEN *tries to break away, but* JIM, *smiling, mocking, watchful, holds her there a little longer. And at the last moment, led by some whimsey of the battle within,* PAUL *veers to a new course. He goes to the door, gropes for handhold, leans there, staring out, panting.*) Have I *thought?* D'you suppose I don't *know* what this life means for Jen?
(JEN, *weak with revulsion from waiting before that blind advance, has gone limp in the man's arms. He lifts her chin with a finger.*)

JIM (*his triumphant, mocking eyes holding hers*)
Because you know, Paul, Jen wasn't meant for—well—she was meant more for shore things—dancing and singing and going about—and seeing other girls—and—men! (*In a whisper:*) Eh?
(JEN, *held close, confronts him, unbreathing, her eyes narrowed with fury—for a moment. Then, suddenly, amazingly, with another kind of fury, she drags his head down and covers his face with a passion of kisses.*)

PAUL (*turning in the doorway, rocked in a wind he cannot understand*)
God alive! (JEN *tears free. She stands swaying, breathless, staring at* JIM *as she might stare at a*

strange creature come out of a wood. PAUL *starts back from the door.) God alive! Jen.*
(Coming too near the stair, his head strikes the iron. He totters an instant, then goes down in a quiet heap on the floor. After a space of complete and unstirring silence, JEN *moves toward him with an odd effect of slowness, on tiptoe. She crouches beside him. Her hand strokes his hair.* JIM, *appalled, embarrassed, wiping his mouth on his wrist, follows. He makes to lay a hand on the unconscious man's heart.* JEN'S *eyes lift to him, oddly blank.)*

JEN (*in a monotonous whisper*)
Don't touch him!

JIM (*continuing to wipe his mouth with the nervous wrist*)
But—but—le's get him up off the—

JEN (*crouching a little lower over the quiet heap*)
Don't touch him. Don't touch him!

JIM
But the man's— He—he's hurt.

JEN
Hurt. Yes, hurt. You hurt him. You and me. We hurt him.

JIM
No. How's that? You mean by *that?* No. He never knew a thing—about *that.* And what he didn't know couldn't hurt him.

JEN (*beginning to shake free of this lethargy, her whisper lifting, wild, ironic*)
Didn't know? *Know?* Two persons live together

seven years—love each other for seven long years—and *they know!* . . . Jim. . . . (*Her eyes turn toward the door.*) Jim. Please go.

JIM
But look a-here—

JEN
Please go. . . . Call the boat.
(JIM, *in an ecstasy of hesitation and uneasiness, shifts to the door. To the left he calls down.*)

JIM
Tender, ahoy! Haul up! Frank! Look alive, will you? Alongside! (*Turning back:*) B-but look a-here, Jen. I'd—I'd like to— If there's anything I—

JEN (*without raising her eyes now, in a dull tone, almost of menace*)
Please go.

JIM (*still hesitating, shuffling, wiping his mouth*)
If there's anything— Well—good-by. . . . I hope Paul is—

JEN
Please go!

JIM
Well—well—good-by. If there's— Well—good-by. Good-by.
(*Exit* JIM *uncertainly, closing the door behind him. After a space of silence* JEN *begins to rock slowly, holding* PAUL'S *head in the crook of her arm.*)

JEN (*crooning*)
Paul, Paul! Oh, my love, my love, my love! My

Paul, my boy! (*Stroking his hair:*) Oh, my love, my love! . . . (*She pulls herself up out of this blank state. She speaks sharply.*) Paul! (*Scrambling up, she attempts to lift his body.* PAUL *sighs, writhes a little.*) *Paul!* Paul *Whalen!* (*He rolls over, lifts on an elbow, opens and shuts his eyes. Helping him to his feet,* JEN *leads him to the chair which she drags out from the dining table.*) Oh, my dear, my dear! My poor hurt dear! (*He sinks into the chair, opens and shuts his eyes, puts a hand to his head.*) Dizzy, Paul?

PAUL (*in a weak, thick voice*)
Little dizzy.

JEN
Poor boy. Here, wait! I'll get some cold water. (*While she is gone, running to the sink,* PAUL *opens his eyes, blinks queerly, and with a pain of wonder stares at his own hand, which he holds up, wagging the fingers. He stares at the rag rug. His weak, new-born vision, dull with miracle, passes to the table legs; wanders up almost to the* "KISS ME AGAIN JEN" *of the blocks along the edge. Almost —not quite. It comes back to his own knees.* JEN *returns with a basin and cloth. Kneeling by him, she bathes the side of his head, enveloping him all the while with the extraordinary, living tenderness of her voice.*)

JEN
Poor, poor boy! I'm so sorry, so sorry—because I love you. I love you more than I can ever make you know—my Paul—my dear— (*He is looking straight into her eyes. Her hand falters. A strange*

quietude falls upon her. She draws back, almost imperceptibly, staring into his pupils. . . . In a marveling, incredulous whisper:) *Paul!*

PAUL

Yes!

JEN

But—*Paul!*

PAUL

Yes. Like a miracle, Jen.

JEN

But how—when— It was that—that fall?

PAUL

Yes. When I got up—got here to the chair—I could see. (*He rises to his feet, expands his chest, stretches out his arms, flexing and tensing the muscles, as if borne in a tide of mounting exuberance, power, hope.*) I can see! I'm a man again! A man! (*He turns his exultant, blinking gaze about the room. It passes over the table, and, without quite pausing to read, over the blocks.*) I can see everything! . . . I can see you! *You!* (*He pulls her up, almost roughly, and holds her off by her shoulders.*) Jen girl, I can see you! You! You!

JEN (*through her tears*)

Oh, I don't know what—to do—to say. It kind of chokes me. It's all so new—all of a sudden—and happy!

PAUL

Yes, new! We'll start off new—somewhere! This is no place for you.

JEN (*with a passionate eagerness*)
Yes, but it is, it is! We'll see it through, Paul. Yes, please! It won't be long now. Jim told me he'd sent up the recommend.

PAUL (*a ghost of trouble shadowing his face*)
Jim—Jim! Listen, Jen. D'you know I had the queerest feeling when Jim was here—the awfulest feeling—about Jim and—and—you.

JEN (*dragging one of his hands from her shoulder and kissing the palm*)
Oh, Paul!

PAUL
Yes, yes, I know. But all the same—it was foolish in me, I know—but all the same I couldn't get away from that queer, awful feeling—
(*He blinks his eyes and puts one of his hands tight over them.*)

JEN
Poor boy! Is it too bright, after the long dark? Wait. (*She runs to blow out the light over the sink.* PAUL, *standing by the table, tries his eyes again. He blinks down at the blocks—from above, so that the legend is hidden—and runs an idle finger over the file.* JEN'S *gaze, turning back, takes in at once his figure and the* "KISS ME AGAIN JEN" *under his hand. She draws a quick breath. She starts toward him, fighting not to hurry.*) Paul, dear!

PAUL
Yes?
(*She is at a loss for words; she tries to laugh, but it turns out a titter.*)

JEN

You—you do love me, Paul? (*Patting her hair with a sort of frozen coyness, she crosses, drawing him away from the blocks. She goes to take down the other lamp. He is following.*) It's time to have a look at the light. Let's—let's go together.

PAUL

Yes. (*He takes the lamp and, putting an arm around her shoulders, leads her to the stair. She goes up first, smiling back at him, her face glorified with love and relief. But* PAUL *hesitates; then starts back, down into the room again.*) But wait a second, Jen. Just a second.

JEN (*putting a hand to her heart*)

What is it?

PAUL (*with a happy laugh*)

Nothing. Just a notion. But you know, this evening, while you were aloft, Paulie spelled out something on the blocks for me to read, and of course I had to laugh it off. But it seemed to me, that minute, I'd give ten years of life to be able to read out loud what that blessed kid had spelled for me. And *now*, by heavens! I'm going to.

(*He starts on again toward the table.*)

JEN (*in a choked way*)

Paul!

PAUL (*half turning, quizzically, holding the lamp up*)

Yes? (JEN *comes down. With graceless, precise steps, like a sleep-walker, she approaches. An uneasiness begins to tinge his tone.*) Yes, Jen? Jen? JEN! What—is it?

JEN (*standing still before him, her cheeks pressed between her two hands*)
You love me. Don't you, Paul?

PAUL
Why—why, Jen—you know!

JEN
And you know I love you. Don't you, Paul?

PAUL
Why, Jen—dear—why—yes!

JEN (*reaching out her hand*)
Well, then, won't you come—now?

PAUL (*taking her hand*)
Of course I will, dear! It was only—only a second—(*Turning his head quickly, he peers down at the blocks. In a mystified tone:*) "Kiss me a—" . . . Well, I want to know! Now did Paulie— (*He takes his hand from* JEN *and runs it through his hair.*) "Kiss me again—*Jen.*" What in the world would Paulie— (*His head and shoulders come back abruptly, as if he has taken a blow. He turns slowly to look at* JEN. *She has not moved. After a moment of mute confrontation, she leans forward suddenly and blows out the light in* PAUL'S *hand. In the darkness, unmarred save by the faint round patch of the moonlit porthole, the perfect silence continues over the drone of the surf. Then, after a long while, the man's voice is heard.*) Did you?

JEN
Yes.

PAUL
I *have* been blind. (*When he speaks again after an-*

other lapse of silence, there is a change—a catch of discovery—a little break of wonder and penitence.) Jen! He—Jim—he knew I was blind. He knew! He held it over you. I see it now. He held that over you, the hound! His duty—duty—and he made you kiss him, to save me—my place here. He made you! Jen?

JEN

Yes.

PAUL

And you did it—to save me!

JEN

Yes.

PAUL

Even that—for me. Though it was a deathly hurt to you!

JEN

Yes. . . . (*After another moment:*) Wait! No, Paul. Wait! Wait. . . . It's like starting new to-night, isn't it? There can't be—mustn't be—any lies between us to-night! No! There mustn't! Wait! . . . Hark, Paul! I kissed Jim Paine—to save you—us—because he made me do it—first! . . . And then—(*with a broken rush:*)—then—then I kissed him again—kissed him myself—because—because I wanted to. . . . There, Paul! I've told you! (*Another hush.*) Why did I? Why did I want to? I don't know—don't suppose— Paul, do you know anything about girls? Sometimes girls are crazy—just for a minute sometimes—crazy wild for things—wild, Paul, just simply to be *made* to do—

things— (*Yet another silence, pregnant with growing fright.*) Where are you, Paul? . . . Paul! . . . *Paul!*

(*There is a crash of wooden cubes, falling and scattering over the floor.*)

PAUL (*his voice thick with self-mockery*)
The blocks *I* made! *I* made!

JEN (*when the silence grows again—her tone sharp with nerves*)
Paul, where are you?

PAUL
I am alone. Everything was all new again—and now I'm alone in it. (*The door opens, letting in the pale flood of the moon.* PAUL *goes out, a black silhouette, and stands on the platform, his hands locked behind him, his eyes staring away to sea, his shoulders hunched and dogged. In bitter soliloquy:*)
Yes, I have been blind! Have been blind!

JEN (*becoming visible as she comes softly near the door behind him*)
But never so blind as you are now, Paul. Ah, you don't know.

PAUL (*his head sinking a little farther into his neck*)
You wanted to kiss Jim Paine. You said that. You wanted Jim Paine's kisses on your mouth. I know that. That's all I need to know.

JEN
Yes. Just that minute I did, somehow. Like a girl at a party, somehow. . . . And, Paul, I love you.

PAUL (*shaking his shoulders savagely*)
Love! Love! . . . I don't blame you, though.

Blame you? God a-livin', no! It isn't your fault. It's fate. It's our make-up. The likes of you ought never to have cast in with the likes of me, that's all. I can see that now. I'm not blind any longer.

JEN (*leaning wearily in the doorway*)
And I say you were never so blind.

PAUL (*shaking himself, ignoring her words*)
You got to have gayety, that's what. You want it—gayety.

JEN
I want it—yes.

PAUL
You want the things I couldn't give you—friends, laughter, dancing—

JEN
Did you ever see woman yet that didn't?

PAUL
I said it to-night; I say it again. You ought to have married Jim. It would have all been simple if you'd married Jim.

JEN
Paul, I'm yours.

PAUL
Mine? Yes, because you're tied to me—tied to me —with a rope!

JEN (*slowly*)
Ah, not one rope. So many. So many.

PAUL (*lowering his head, bull-like, as if to charge the moonlit sky*)
You ought to have the things you like; then you'd be

happy. Then love would have stayed. Not the things your living with me could give you. Not loneliness—

JEN (*musing, echoing*)

Not loneliness. Not the loneliness, of an evening, when we've stood up on the walk-around there, and not a sound nor a soul or sail in the world. Stood in the loneliness, together. But that's a rope. . . .

PAUL

You shouldn't have had Paulie—to bother you. Maybe if you'd married Jim you wouldn't have had a child to wear you down, your nerves, your temper, your love—till you could almost kill her—for the least thing—not eating her supper—even for just being peaked and pale.

JEN

Yes—or for creeping into my bed before it's light in the morning, when I'm so sleepy, so sleepy—to snuggle against me and bother me and keep me awake—while she goes off to sleep again. . . . Ropes! Ropes!

PAUL (*his dogged, passionate bitterness rising all the while*)

Nor a blind man, a useless blind man all of a sudden, to have to do for—

JEN

To have to lead by the hand. Ropes, Paul, ropes! . . .

PAUL

Nor that—that thing. That pain and horror and grief. That thing last year. That's enough, I sup-

pose, to kill the last—the last of—of a woman's love—

JEN

Yes—that. . . . That was a year ago to-night, Paul. Had you thought? I had. It was a night like this, full moon, only colder. A cold wind. Or perhaps it was only it seemed cold, because I was so weak. So weak. Remember? And as we stood on the rock down there, after we'd let—the baby—go—then the cold wind seemed to blow right through me, body and soul—so cruel, so sad—it blew out with the tide, where the baby went—blew so cold against my body and soul, all except where your arm was, around me, holding me up. . . . And there wasn't anything left in life that night. Nothing but to stumble on, somehow, on and on, side by side—you and me—together. Ropes! Ropes! . . .

PAUL (*turning slowly to her, unsettled in spite of himself, groping*)

Why—why do you keep saying "ropes" . . . "ropes"?

JEN

You don't see what love is, Paul. What the love of a woman is for the man she loves. . . .

PAUL

Wha-what—

JEN

Ropes, Paul. Nothing but ropes. . . . All those ropes—black ropes and white ones—happy ones and sad—but all ropes, binding us tight, hand and foot and body and soul—so we can't get away from each other—no matter—ever—ever—ever—

PAUL

Jen, you've never looked at me like that—

JEN

You've been blind so long. . . . But no! I've been, too. We're all blind. Almost all the time. All of us. Half blind at the least. Dull blind, all of us, almost all the time—till something hits us—and it comes light. . . . (*Fiercely:*) Paul! Kiss me!

PAUL (*taking hold of her shoulders*)

For God's sake, Jen! . . . *Jen!*

CURTAIN

(1)

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